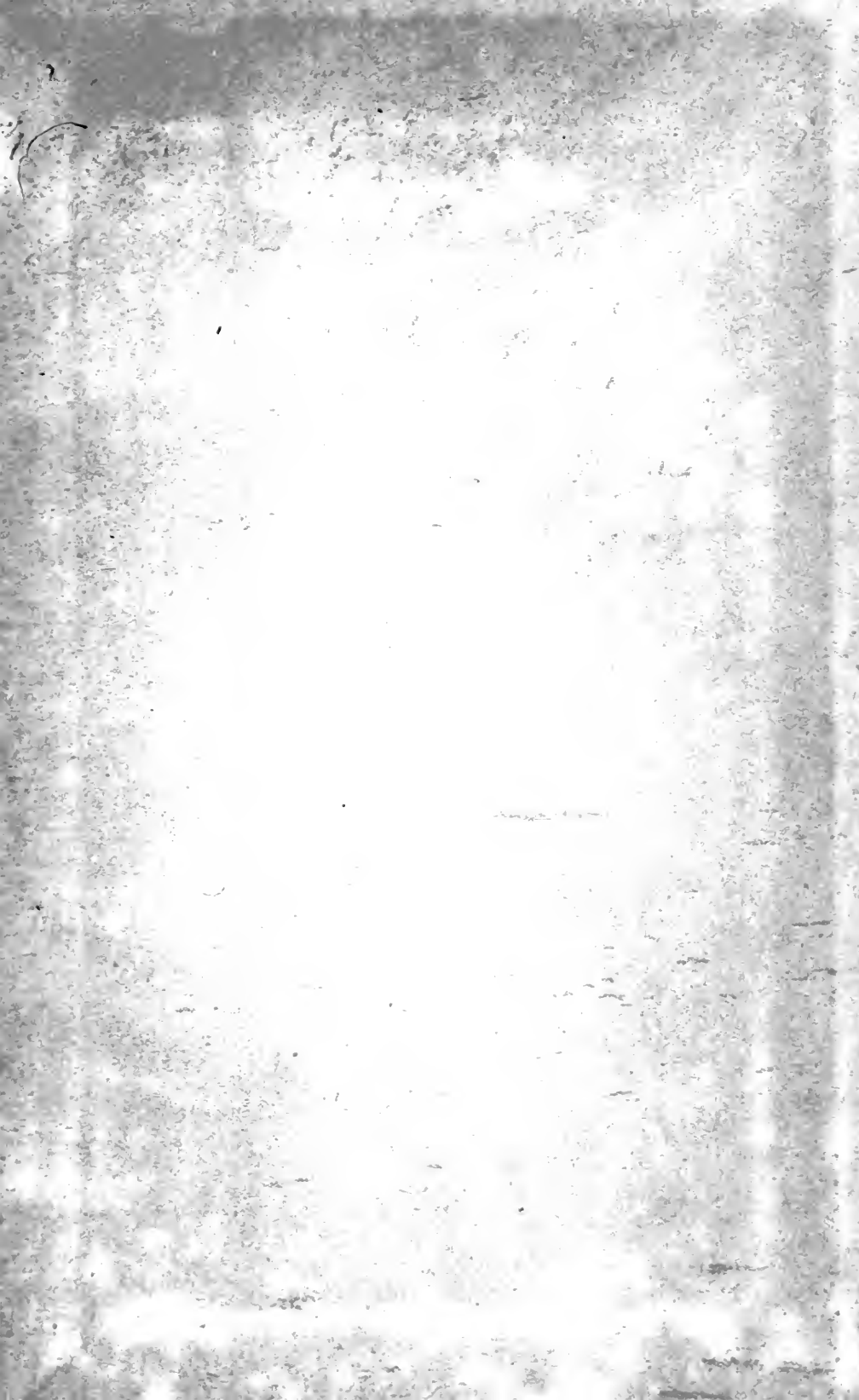


QUEENS OF THE  
FRENCH STAGE



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QUEENS OF THE FRENCH  
STAGE







*Adrienne Lecouvreur*  
*After the painting by Charles Leypel*

# QUEENS OF THE FRENCH STAGE

BY

H. NOEL WILLIAMS

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POMPADOUR," "MADAME DE MONTESPAN," "MADAME  
DU BARRY," ETC.

NEW YORK  
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS  
153-157 FIFTH AVENUE  
1905



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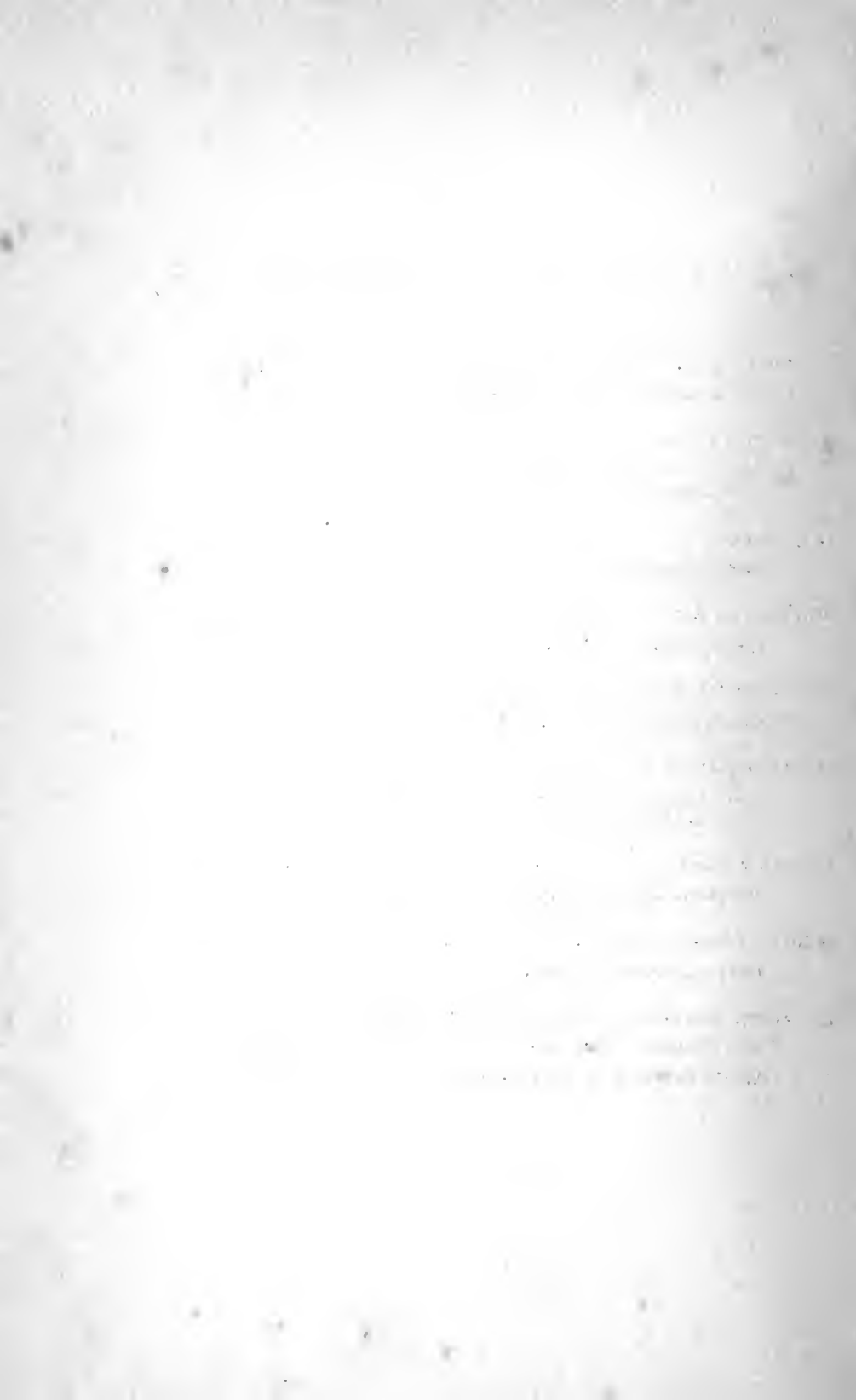
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I  
THE WIFE OF MOLIÈRE



# QUEENS OF THE FRENCH STAGE

## I

### THE WIFE OF MOLIERE

FEW women in French history have been the subject of more discussion than the young girl whom Molière married, at the church of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, on February 20, 1662.

Armande Grésinde Claire Elisabeth Béjart, for that was the bride's name, is described in the marriage deed as the daughter of the late Joseph Béjart, *écuyer*, sieur de Belleville, and of his widow, Marie Hervé. Joseph Béjart, it should be stated, had died shortly before, or shortly after, Armande's birth.

The Béjarts were very poor, for the only means which Joseph seems to have possessed wherewith to maintain his pretensions to nobility were derived from a small government appointment (*huissier ordinaire du roy ès eaux et forêts de France*), and his wife had presented him with "at least eleven children." They lived in the Marais, then the theatrical quarter of Paris. On its northern outskirts, near the Halles, in the Rue Mauconseil, stood the old Hôtel de Bourgogne, the first home of the regular drama; in the centre, in the Rue Vieille du

Temple, was the theatre which took its name from the quarter, the Théâtre du Marais, where Corneille's *Cid* was first performed; while nearer the Seine, the playgoer could make choice between the Italian troupes, the *Trois Farceurs*, Gaultier-Garguille, Gros-Guillaume, and Turlupin,<sup>1</sup> and open-air entertainments on the Pont-au-Change, the Pont-Neuf, and the Place Dauphine. It is, therefore, not surprising that the little Bèjarts should have been in the habit of varying the monotony of their poverty-stricken lives by occasional visits to one or other of these spectacles, or that, dazzled by those well-known attractions, which were doubtless as potent in the seventeenth century as they are to-day, the two eldest, Joseph and Madeleine, should have decided, while still very young, to make the stage their profession.

What theatre witnessed their *débuts* we do not know. The majority of authors are of opinion that they joined a company of strolling players which was at this time exploiting Languedoc; M. Larroumet hesitates between one of the unlicensed playhouses of the fairs in the neighbourhood of Paris and a troupe of amateurs, several of which were to be found in the capital; while another of Madeleine's biographers, M. Henri Chardon, thinks that she obtained admission to the Théâtre du

<sup>1</sup> Their real names were Hugues Guéru, Robert Guérin, and Henri Legrand. Apprenticed to bakers in the Faubourg Saint-Laurent, they deserted their masters to play in a tennis-court near the Estrapade, a machine invented, in the days of François I., for the benefit of heretics. Turlupin usually played a roguish valet, Gros-Guillaume a pedant, and Gaultier-Garguille a supremely stupid old man. They eventually joined the company of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, whose popularity was immensely strengthened by their inclusion.—Hawkins, "Annals of the French Stage," i. 51.

Marais, though it appears very improbable that a young and inexperienced actress could have met with such good fortune.

However that may be, Madeleine seems to have prospered in her profession from the very outset, as on January 10, 1636, supported by her *curateur*, one Simon Courtin, her father, a paternal uncle, a "*chef du gobelet du roi*," and divers other relatives and friends, she appears before the Civil Lieutenant of Paris<sup>1</sup> to request permission to contract a loan of 2000 livres, wherewith to supplement a like sum of her own and enable her to acquire a little house and garden situated in the Cul-de-Sac Thorigny.

Two and a half years later (July 11, 1638), we hear of her again, under circumstances which perhaps explain her desire to secure a residence of her own—a desire, it must be admitted, not a little singular in a young lady of eighteen—for on that day is baptized at Saint-Eustache "Françoise, daughter of Esprit Raymond, chevalier, seigneur de Modène and other places, chamberlain of the affairs of Monseigneur, only brother of the King, and of the demoiselle Madeleine Béjart."

M. de Modène and Madeleine were not married; indeed, there was already a Madame de Modène, residing at Le Mans, who did not die until 1649. But this trifling accident, as it was regarded in those days, did not prevent the son of the former (by proxy)<sup>2</sup> and the

<sup>1</sup> The Civil Lieutenant was, after the Provost of Paris, the first magistrate of the Châtelet; to him belonged, among other functions, the supervision of guardians and trustees of children under age and of *conseils de famille*.

<sup>2</sup> He was a child of seven or eight, and his father's object in inserting his name in the *acte de naissance* was probably to annoy his unfortunate wife.

mother of the latter (in person) standing as sponsors to the little Françoise, whose birth was fated to be the cause of much trouble, not to her guilty parents, but to two perfectly innocent persons, one of whom was as yet unborn.

A few words must here be said of the father of Madeleine Béjart's child.

Esprit Raymond de Mormoiron, Comte de Modène, who was then about thirty years of age, came of an old family in the Venaissin. His father, François Raymond de Mormoiron, had at one time held the office of Grand Provost of France and had also been employed on several diplomatic missions. Appointed page to Gaston d'Orléans, brother of Louis XIII., he became later one of the chamberlains of that prince, and seems to have done his best to imitate him in his dissipated and turbulent conduct. He early ranged himself among the enemies of Richelieu, joined the famous league "for the universal peace of Christendom," and fought on its behalf at the battle of La Marfée, at the head of a body of cavalry which he had raised at his own expense. In consequence of this, he was condemned to death, by a decree of the Parliament of Paris (September 6, 1641), but took refuge in Flanders, with the Duc de Guise, against whom a similar sentence had been pronounced, and remained there until the death of Richelieu, followed by that of Louis XIII., left him at liberty to return to France. When, in 1647, Guise went to Naples, to endeavour to exploit the revolt of Masaniello to his own advantage, Modène accompanied him and greatly distinguished himself. He was eventually, however, taken prisoner by the Spaniards and held captive until 1650. On his return to France, he meddled no more with public affairs,



but occupied himself with the care of his neglected estates and in the compilation of a valuable history of the revolution in Naples, reprinted, in 1826, under the title of *Mémoires du Comte de Modène*. It is to be noted here that from the early autumn of 1641 until the summer of 1643 the Comte de Modène was absent from France.

Some time in the early weeks of the year 1643, probably either in the last week in February or the first in March, Madeleine's father, Joseph Béjart the elder, died; and on March 10, Marie Hervé, his widow, presented herself before the Civil Lieutenant of Paris, where, in the name, and as guardian, of Joseph, Madeleine, Geneviève, Louis, and "*a little girl not yet baptized,*" children under age (*i.e.* under twenty-five) of the said deceased and herself, she represented that "the inheritance of her deceased husband being charged with heavy debts without any property wherewith to acquit them, she feared that it would be more burdensome than profitable," and, accordingly, declared her intention of renouncing it. Her request was supported by her brother-in-law, Pierre Béjart, *procureur* to the Châtelet, and other relatives, and on June 10 of the same year she was permitted to make the renunciation she desired.

Now who was this "little unbaptized girl"? Without a shadow of doubt, Armande Béjart, the future wife of Molière; on this point all the poet's biographers are unanimous. Was she, as represented, the daughter of Marie Hervé? That is the question which has afforded material for a controversy which has already lasted for nearly two hundred and fifty years and seems not unlikely to continue till the end of all things, for the most fantastic theories, for a small library of books and

pamphlets, and for review and newspaper articles without number. For some see in this little girl a sister, others a *daughter* of Madeleine Béjart, and the truth is of the most vital importance to the honour of the great man whose wife Armande became.

That the latter impression was almost universal amongst Molière's contemporaries is beyond question, nor is the fact one that need occasion any surprise. Every one, that is to say, every one connected with, or interested in, the theatrical world, was aware that, early in life, Madeleine Béjart had had a little girl; while, on the other hand, the birth of Marie Hervé's child, which was of no public interest, and which, moreover, probably took place not in Paris, but in one of the adjacent villages,<sup>1</sup> was known to very few. A young girl grew up with Madeleine, who was tenderly attached to her; it was Armande; but gossip confounded her with the child Françoise, of whom all trace seems to have been lost, and the wiseacres smiled the smile begotten of superior knowledge when any stranger to Paris chanced to refer to the girl as Madeleine's sister.

For over a century and a half this belief remained unchallenged. Hostile or sympathetic, all who wrote of Molière—La Grange, Grimarest, Breuze de la Martinière, Bayle, Donneau de Visé—shared the common opinion in regard to the origin of Armande Béjart. In 1821, however, there was quite a flutter of excitement in literary

<sup>1</sup> This is Jal's conclusion. While compiling his famous *Dictionnaire critique de Biographie et d'Histoire*, he made an exhaustive search of the registers of all the old parishes of Paris—there were sixty-eight—but failed to discover either the *acte de naissance* of Armande or the death certificate of Joseph Béjart, which two events must have taken place within a few days of each other.

circles, for in that year Beffara discovered Molière's *acte de mariage*, in which Armande is spoken of as the daughter of Joseph Béjart and his widow, Marie Hervé. Forty-two years later, the old scandal, which in the interim had been partly revived by M. Fournier (*Études sur la vie et les œuvres de Molière*) and M. Bazin (*Notes historiques sur Molière*), received another severe blow by Eudore Soulié's discovery of the deed of March 10, 1643, already mentioned, wherein Marie Hervé requested permission to renounce the succession to her husband's property, and which confirmed the statement made in the *acte de mariage*. Such evidence, one would naturally suppose, would have been accepted as conclusive, and the matter set at rest once and for all. But tradition dies hard; not a few *Moliéristes* refused to renounce an opinion sanctioned by so many generations, and M. Jules Loiseleur, a writer who enjoyed a considerable, and not undeserved, reputation as an unraveller of historical mysteries, propounded, on behalf of his fellow-sceptics, the following theory.

The declarations made by Marie Hervé, in the deed of March 10, 1643, and again in the *acte de mariage*, that Armande was her child, were, he maintains, deliberate falsehoods, conceived in the interests of her daughter, Madeleine. At the beginning of the year 1643, Madeleine was about to become a mother, for the second time, not, of course, by the Comte de Modène, who had been in exile for nearly two years, but by some new lover. Fearing that if Modène returned and learned the fact, he would refuse to resume the *liaison*, which she hoped might one day be regularised (M. Loiseleur was under the impression that Madame de Modène was dead, whereas she lived until 1649), she begged her mother

to recognise the child as her own; a request to which that complacent old lady, whose husband was just dead, or on the point of death, readily consented.

Now this ingenious theory is based on the advanced age of Marie Hervé—she was then about fifty-three—and the belief that she had not had a child since the birth of Louis Béjart, afterwards a prominent member of Molière's troupe, who was born on November 14 or 15, 1630, that is to say, more than twelve years earlier, which facts rendered it highly improbable that she could have been the mother of Armande; and M. Loiseleur supports his contention by pointing out that the two eldest children, Joseph and Madeleine, described in the deed of March 10, 1643, as minors, were over twenty-five, and that their age was purposely understated to make their mother appear younger than she was, and so facilitate the fraud. This point has been contested by Mr. Andrew Lang, in his admirable article on Molière in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, but is really of no importance, as if M. Loiseleur had exercised a little more care, he would have found that so far from more than twelve years having elapsed between the birth of the last of Marie Hervé's children and that of Armande, she had had a little girl *less than three and a half years before* (November 30, 1639), baptized, in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, by the name of Bénigne Madeleine, the second name being doubtless intended as a compliment to Madeleine Béjart, who acted as *marraine*.<sup>1</sup> Whereby M. Loiseleur's argument disappears, and his theory with it.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Armande's contemporaries saw in her not a sister, but a daughter of

<sup>1</sup> Jal, *Dictionnaire critique de Biographie et d'Histoire*, Article "Béjart."

Madeline Béjart, and, with this belief, they held another, to wit, that Molière had been, previous to his marriage with the younger sister, the lover of the elder. From which two suppositions sprang one of the most hideous accusations that has ever sullied the reputation of a great man.

Molière, like most successful men, had a good many enemies, and was accustomed to give and receive very hard knocks. With the company of the Théâtre du Marais he appears to have been on tolerably amicable terms; but with the actors of the third great theatre, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, his relations were decidedly strained, and whenever an opportunity arose of turning one or other of them into ridicule, he seldom failed to avail himself of it, though he made an exception in the case of Floridor, who was too great a favourite with the public for them to tolerate any attacks upon him. In his *Impromptu de Versailles*, played before the Court in October 1663, Molière satirised several actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and, among them, one named Montfleury,<sup>1</sup> whose ponderous style of declamation he imitated with great success. To this, Montfleury's son, Antoine Montfleury, who was a prolific and successful dramatist, replied with another play, called *l'Impromptu de l'hôtel de Condé*, in which he endeavoured to turn the tables on Molière; but the vengeance of the father took a very different form.

<sup>1</sup> His real name was Zacharie Jacob. A gentleman by birth, he had been educated for the army and had served the Duc de Guise as page, but his passion for the theatre led him to become an actor. In spite of the ridicule to which he was subjected by Molière, he was an excellent tragedian, and in parts made up of "transports and bursts of rage" much admired. His death, which occurred in 1668, is said to have been caused by over-exertion as Orestes in Racine's *Andromaque*.

In December 1663, Racine wrote to the Abbé Le Vasseur: "Montfleury has drawn up a memorial and presented it to the King. He accuses him [Molière] of having married the daughter [Armande], and of having formerly lived with the mother [Madeleine]. But Montfleury is not listened to at Court."<sup>1</sup> From this passage it is evident that Montfleury intended Louis XIV. to believe that Molière had married his own daughter; which is the starting-point of the abominable calumny which so long weighed, and which still weighs, on the memory of the great dramatist.

Beyond what Racine tells us, we have no information about this memorial of Montfleury. That he advanced any proofs in support of his accusation is extremely improbable; although it is quite possible that he would have endeavoured to substantiate it had he received any encouragement from the King. Any way, Louis XIV. appears to have satisfied himself that the charge was merely the outcome of jealousy and spite, and when, in the following February, Molière's first child was baptized at Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, he and his sister-in-law, the ill-fated Henrietta of England, stood sponsors. Than which the poet could have desired no more complete reparation.

Thirteen years later, in 1676, that is to say, three years after Molière's death, Montfleury's accusation was repeated. A man of the name of Guichard, a sort of *entrepreneur* for fêtes and plays, coveted Lulli's post as director of the recently-established Opera, and, seeing no likelihood of realising his ambition by any legitimate means, had recourse to poison, the fashionable expedient for ridding oneself of professional rivals and other incon-

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres complètes de J. Racine* (édit. d'Aime-Martin), vi. 136.

venient persons at this period. One Sebastian Aubry, a connection of the Bédarts, was entrusted with the commission; but, instead of executing it, he informed Lulli, who promptly invoked the protection of the law. An inquiry was held and numerous witnesses called for the prosecution, among whom was the widow of Molière. In order to discredit the testimony of these witnesses, Guichard drew up a memorial, in which, besides making the most infamous charges against Armande's moral character, of which we shall speak later, he alluded to her as "the orphan of her husband" and "the widow of her father." Unlike Montfleury, however, who was an old and respected member of his profession, Guichard appears to have been a consummate scoundrel, capable of any villainy to serve his ends; and we can hardly believe that a charge made by such a person could have excited any feelings, save those of indignation and disgust.

However, unhappily, other pens were not wanting to keep alive this hideous calumny. It is true that there are no further direct accusations; but there are allusions, which, as they appear in works that enjoyed, in their day, a considerable circulation, must have answered much the same purpose. In 1770, seven years after Montfleury had set the ball rolling, a certain Le Boulanger de Chalussay, of whom little or nothing seems to be known, attacked Molière in a play called *Élomire hypocondre, ou les Médecins vengés*—Élomire being, of course, an anagram of Molière. This play, intended as a reply to the great dramatist's repeated attacks on the medical profession, was a fatuous production, dull, confused, and encumbered with an absurd number of characters; and the company of the

Hôtel de Bourgogne, to whom it was submitted, very prudently declined to accept it, notwithstanding which the author caused it to be printed and circulated. In one scene, Élomire speaks of the care he is taking to train up his wife in the way he would have her go, in order to avoid all risk of finding himself numbered among deceived husbands. Thereupon, his confidant reminds him of the fate which befell Arnolphe in the *École des femmes*, in spite of all his precautions.<sup>1</sup> But Élomire replies that he is better advised than Arnolphe:—

“Arnolphe commença trop tard à la forger ;  
C'est avant le berceau qu'il y devoit songer,  
Comme quelqu'un l'a fait.”

Molière demanded and obtained the suppression of *Élomire hypocondre*; but this only had the effect of stimulating its circulation, as, in the following year, a new edition was clandestinely printed in the provinces, and, in 1672, a third was produced by the Elzevirs, in Holland.

Another allusion occurs in a scandalous work entitled *La Fameuse Comédienne*, published anonymously in 1688, of which we shall have a good deal to say hereafter: “She [Armande] was the daughter of the deceased Béjart, a provincial actress, who was making the *bonne fortune* of numbers of young gentlemen in Languedoc at the time of the auspicious birth of her daughter. That is why it is very difficult, in the face of such promiscuous gallantry, to say who was the father.” And the writer concludes: “She is believed to be the daughter

<sup>1</sup> See p. 33, *infra*.



of Molière, notwithstanding the fact that he afterwards became her husband; however, one does not really know the truth."

It appears to be the tendency among modern writers, while indignantly repudiating the accusation of Montfleury, to accept with complacency the opinion of Molière's contemporaries that his relations with Madeleine Béjart had been, at one time, on a closer footing than that of friendship. In this they show a singular want of consistency, for, as M. Gustave Larroumet, than whom Molière has no more ardent admirer, very justly observes, the two suppositions are inseparable, and those who admit the probability of the second cannot well deny the possibility of the first, provided, of course, that they hold, with M. Loiseleur, that Marie Hervé had been guilty of fraud in the documents discovered by Beffara and Eudore Soulié, and that Armande was the daughter of Madeleine.<sup>1</sup>

Let us, however, look at the facts as briefly as may be, since the subject is not one upon which it profits greatly to dwell.

Molière's connection with the Béjart family is commonly believed to have begun some time in 1641 or 1642. In June 1643, Madeleine Béjart, with her younger sister Gèneviève, and her brothers, Joseph and Louis, joined Molière and several others in founding the *Illustre Théâtre*. She remained faithful to Molière's fortunes during those disastrous two years, when the receipts of the new theatre did not suffice to discharge the ordinary working expenses, and its chief was, on one occasion, imprisoned in the *Châtelet*, until the bill of an

<sup>1</sup> M. Gustave Larroumet, *La Comédie de Molière, l'auteur et le milieu*, p. 85.

importunate candle-merchant had been settled. When the company left Paris, in the spring of 1646, on its twelve years' wanderings through the provinces, she accompanied it, and, in addition to playing in nearly every piece, appears to have superintended the costumes and scenery, and regulated the expenses, at least so far as concerned Molière and the three other Bèjarts. Finally, when Molière returned to Paris, in 1658, and the company was installed, first, at the Petit-Bourbon and, afterwards, at the Palais-Royal, she retained her place and continued to play regularly down to the time of her death on February 17, 1678, exactly a year before that of Molière himself.

An admirable actress, one of the best of her time, according to Tallemant des Réaux, ready to undertake almost any rôle in either tragedy or comedy, she excelled in depicting smartly-attired maids, who ridicule the follies of their employers with equal wit, impudence, and good sense, and, but for her, Molière might never have created his inimitable *soubrettes*.<sup>1</sup> She was, moreover, remarkably handsome, tall and graceful, with hair of a peculiarly beautiful blonde hue, and La Fontaine, Loret, and other contemporaries speak of her in terms of unfeigned admiration; while she seems to have possessed some literary ability, having, when a girl of eighteen, addressed a quatrain to Rotrou, who had just produced his *Hercule mourant* at the Hôtel de Bourgogne—which so delighted the dramatist that he published it in an edition of his work—and also adapted an old comedy, which was performed by the Illustre Théâtre in the provinces.

That a very warm friendship and regard existed

<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, "Annals of the French Stage," ii. 61.

between Madeleine and Molière is certain, nor does what we know of the latter's relations with other ladies of his troupe render a closer connection improbable. In 1653, at Lyons, the Illustre Théâtre was strengthened by the accession of two actresses, Mlle. du Parc and Mlle. de Brie,<sup>1</sup> both destined to rise to eminence in their profession. Molière promptly fell in love with the former, who, however, rejected his addresses, as she subsequently did those of Pierre Corneille and La Fontaine, upon which the mortified dramatist transferred his attentions to the less attractive, but more sympathetic, Mlle. de Brie, and formed with her a *liaison* which appears to have lasted until his marriage, and was resumed at a later date.

Under these circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that contemporary gossip should have coupled the names of Molière and Madeleine together—"M. Despréaux

<sup>1</sup> They were both married women and the wives of actors, who joined Molière's company at the same time. At this period, and indeed for long afterwards, actresses bore officially the title of "demoiselle," as did all women other than the wives of the nobility, or of ennobled citizens, or daughters of noble parents who had married citizens: these were styled "dame" and "madame." Thus, we find Colbert, before he rose to fame, "offering a coach to *Mademoiselle*, his wife;" the mother of La Bruyère described in a legal document as a "*demoiselle veuve*"; while La Fontaine, in his correspondence, invariably refers to his wife as "*Mademoiselle*." People spoke also of *la Du Parc*, *la de Brie*, *la Béjart*, *la Molière*, and so forth, a custom which has continued to this day. This *la*, which appears so contemptuous, was not the exclusive property of actresses or of women of the people. Madame de Sévigné and Saint-Simon employ it for ladies of the fashionable world, but, by preference, for those of medium virtue: *la Beauvais*, *la Montespan*, &c.; and eighteenth century writers frequently make use of it in referring to the mistresses of Louis XV.: *la Châteauroux*, *la Pompadour*, *la Du Barry*. Nowadays, however, it is no longer a term of contempt; "it has become a particle which confers nobility and immortality on great singers and *tragédiennes*, if the race is not extinct." —M. J. Noury, *La Champmeslé*, p. 94.

[Boileau] told me," writes Brossette, "that Molière had been in love with the actress Béjart, whose daughter he espoused,"—or that many modern writers should have taken the same view. M. Larroumet, we may observe, is of the contrary opinion, but, though generally so correct, he appears in this instance to be arguing from a false premise. He assumes that the Comte de Modène returned to Paris in the summer of 1643 and resumed his former relations with Madeleine, which fact, he says, makes a *liaison* between her and Molière altogether improbable. But the count's biographer, M. Chardon, asserts that at the time when M. Larroumet believes Modène to have been in Paris, he was residing on his estates in the Venaissin, and that he did not visit the capital until the autumn of 1646, that is to say, after the Illustre Théâtre had left for the provinces. Shortly after this, the count set out with the Duc de Guise for Italy, where, as we have mentioned, he remained until 1650.<sup>1</sup>

But, after all, the nature of Molière's relations with Madeleine Béjart subsequent to the birth of Armande is of very secondary importance; it is on the degree of intimacy existing between them *prior* to that event that the whole question hinges. That they were at that time anything more than friends—possibly only acquaintances—there is not a shred of evidence to prove; for the rumours we have spoken of relate mainly to the early years of the Illustre Théâtre. Indeed, so little is known about their movements previous to the establishment of that institution that it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty whether their paths in life lay together or far apart at a particular date, much less to

<sup>1</sup> M. Henri Chardon, *Nouveaux documents sur la vie de Molière : M. de Modène, ses deux femmes, et Madeleine Béjart.*

hazard an opinion upon so very delicate a matter as the one under discussion.

M. Larroumet says that from July 1638, when her little daughter, Françoise, was born, until June 1643, when the Illustre Théâtre was founded, we lose all trace of Madeleine. This is not quite correct, as on November 30, 1639, she appears as *marraine* at the baptism of her little sister, Bénigne Madeleine, in the parish of Saint-Sauveur, and, six months later (June 5, 1640), we find her discharging the same duty to a child of one Robert de la Voypierre, described as a *valet-de-chambre*, at the Church of Saint-Sulpice.<sup>1</sup> After that, it is true, nothing more is heard of her for three years. Now, where was she during these three years? M. Chardon thinks that she was in Paris until the early summer of 1641, and during the remainder of the time—that is to say, for the eighteen months or more preceding Armande's birth—in the provinces, with a company of strolling players; and this is the reason he gives for his supposition.

In May 1641, a friend of the Comte de Modène, Jean Baptiste de l'Hermite, brother of Tristan de l'Hermite, author of the tragedy of *Mariamne*, together with his wife and a servant of the count, were arrested and imprisoned in the Château of Vincennes, apparently on a charge of treasonable correspondence with Modène. Thereupon, Madeleine, apprehensive of sharing their fate, her connection with Modène being well known, leaves Paris and joins a company in the provinces, and does not show her face in the capital again until Richelieu and Louis XIII. are both dead, and all danger for the Count and his friends removed.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jal, *Dictionnaire critique de Biographie et d'Histoire*: Article "Béjart."

<sup>2</sup> M. Henri Chardon, *Nouveaux documents sur la vie de Molière: M. de Modène, ses deux femmes, et Madeleine Béjart*.

As for Molière, he is commonly believed to have spent the year 1642 in Paris, with the exception of the months of May, June, and July, when M. Loiseleur is of opinion that he replaced his father as *tapissier valet-de-chambre* to the King, who was then returning by easy stages from the conquest of Roussillon.

Now, if these two theories are correct, as they probably are, it is obvious that, whoever was the father of Madeleine Béjart's child, supposing her to have been the mother of Armande, which few now will be found to maintain, it could not have been Molière, unless Madeleine was a member of a troupe of strolling players, which performed several times before the Court at Montfrin, during its stay there in the latter part of June, a contingency so remote as to be hardly worth taking into account. With which observations, we hasten to take leave of this most unpleasant subject, and begin our history of Armande Béjart.

When the Illustre Théâtre quitted Paris, in the spring of 1646, Marie Hervé and her little daughter accompanied it. It does not appear probable, however, as some writers have supposed, that Armande's early years were passed on the high roads. From what we know of her accomplishments, she must have received a far superior education to that which a little Bohemian could have obtained. According to one account, she lived for some years in Languedoc, "with a lady of distinguished rank in that province," and did not return to her family until 1653, when the company, relatively more stable, had made Lyons its headquarters. Thenceforward Armande's education was carried on under the immediate supervision of Molière himself, who, as time

went on, began to take something more than a friendly interest in the progress of his pupil, and ended by falling passionately in love with her.

Nearly all the biographers of Molière and Armande agree that Madeleine Béjart was much occupied by this marriage, though they differ widely in the part they assign to her, some asserting that she laboured strenuously to prevent it, others that she did her utmost to bring it about. According to Grimarest, one of the oldest of the poet's biographers—who believed Madeleine to have been Molière's mistress, and that she was, moreover, the mother of Armande, though he does not go so far as to attribute the girl's paternity to Molière—Madeleine behaved *en femme furieuse*, threatened to ruin him, her daughter, and herself, if he persisted in his intention, and that in consequence the lovers were compelled to contract a secret marriage.

On the other hand, the anonymous author of *La Fameuse Comédienne*, who wrote nearer the event, gives a wholly different version of the affair. According to him—or more probably her—it is Madeleine who prepared and concluded the marriage, by a series of patient and tortuous intrigues, her object being to recover, through Armande, the influence over Molière of which Mlle. de Brie had deprived her. “She did not fail to exaggerate to Molière the satisfaction he would derive from educating for himself a child whose heart he was sure of possessing, and whose disposition was known to him, and assured him that it was only at that innocent age that one could hope to meet with that sincerity which was found but rarely among persons who had seen the great world. These arguments she often repeated to Molière, at the same time, adroitly calling his atten-

tion to that natural delight which her daughter showed whenever she observed him enter the room, and her blind obedience to his wishes. In a word, she conducted the affair so skilfully that he decided that he could not do better than marry the girl."

These two accounts, remarks M. Larroumet, would appear, at first sight, to be equally unworthy of belief, since they are in direct contradiction to one another. But when we come to examine them more closely, we shall find that, though the worthlessness of Grimarest's version is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Molière's marriage had nothing secret about it, being indeed celebrated publicly in the presence of his family and Armande's, that of the author of *La Fameuse Comédienne* has a basis of truth. Madeleine did, no doubt, play an important part in bringing about the marriage, but the reason which prompted her to do so was very different from that stated by the author. Sincerely attached to both her sister and Molière, she honestly believed that a marriage between them would be to their common advantage, securing to the one an excellent settlement in life, and to the other a means of escape from the gallantries which served but to add fresh annoyances to the cares imposed upon him by his triple rôle of playwright, actor, and manager. She committed a grievous mistake, it is true; but that she was animated by perfectly disinterested motives, and did everything in her power to make the marriage a happy one, there can be no question.<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of the drawing reproduced in this volume, there does not appear to be any portrait of Armande, painted or engraved, the authenticity of which

<sup>1</sup> M. Larroumet, *La Comédie de Molière*, 105 et seq.



is beyond dispute. But, as some atonement for this, several excellent pen-portraits have come down to us. The most interesting of these is, of course, the one traced by Molière's own hand in that exquisite little scene between Cléonte and Covielle in the third act of the *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, where Armande plays the part of the charming Lucile. Cléonte, incensed by Lucile's seeming indifference, determines to break with her, and calls upon the valet to "assist him in his resentment and sustain his resolution against every remnant of affection that may yet plead for her. 'Say, I entreat you, all the harm that you can of her. Make of her person a picture that shall render her contemptible in my sight, and, to disgust me with her, point out all the faults that you can see in her.'"

Smarting under the rebuff just administered to him by Lucile's waiting-woman, Nicole, who follows the example of her mistress, Covielle readily obeys, and proceeds to draw a most unflattering portrait of the young lady. But no sooner does the valet point out some fault in Lucile than his love-lorn master straightway transforms it into a trait of beauty, with an ever-increasing anger and impatience.

*Covielle*.—"To begin with, her eyes are small."

*Cléonte*.—"That is true; her eyes are small, but then they are full of fire—the most brilliant, the most piercing in the world, the tenderest that one can possibly see."

*Covielle*.—"She has a large mouth."

*Cléonte*.—"Yes; but one finds there charms which one does not find in other mouths; and that mouth, when one beholds it, inspires desire; it is the most attractive, the most adorable in the world."

*Covielle*.—"As for her figure, she is not tall."

*Cléonte*.—"No; but she is supple and well-proportioned."

*Covielle*.—"She affects a carelessness in her speech and deportment."

*Cléonte*.—"It is true, but there is grace in all; and her manners are engaging and have a nameless charm which insinuates itself into our hearts."

*Covielle*.—"As to her wit——"

*Cléonte*.—"Ah! she has that, *Covielle*; the finest and most delicate kind."

*Covielle*.—"Her conversation——"

*Cléonte*.—"Her conversation is charming."

*Covielle*.—"It is always serious."

*Cléonte*.—"Would you have unrestrained liveliness and boisterous gaiety? Is there anything more annoying than women who laugh at every word that is spoken?"

*Covielle*.—"But, after all, she is as capricious as any person you can find."

*Cléonte*.—"Yes, she is capricious; there I agree with you; but everything is becoming to, and must be borne with from, the fair."

The fidelity of the foregoing portrait is confirmed by other contemporary evidence. Examined in detail, it would appear that *Armande's* features were far from perfect, but that the *ensemble* was fascinating to a very remarkable degree. *Mlle. Poisson*, in a *Lettre sur la vie et les œuvres de Molière et les comédiens de son temps*, which she contributed to the *Mercure* of 1740, describes her as "of middle height," with "very small eyes," and "a large flat mouth"; but adds that she had "an engaging air," and "performed every action with



ARMANDE BÉJART

From an etching by J. HANKIOT, after a contemporary drawing in the collection  
of M. HENRY HOUSSAYE, of the Académie Française



grace." The elder Grandval is in accord with Mlle. Poisson: "Without being beautiful, she was piquant and capable of inspiring a *grande passion*." While a bitter enemy of Armande, the anonymous author of *La Fameuse Comédienne*, while denying her "*aucun trait de beauté*," is fain to admit that her appearance and manners rendered her very amiable in the opinion of many people, and that she was "very affecting when she wished to please."

That Armande should have triumphed so completely over physical deficiencies was probably due, to some extent, to the perfection of her toilettes. "No one," the brothers Parfaict tell us, in their *Histoire du Théâtre Français*, "knew better than she how to enhance the beauty of her face by the arrangement of her coiffure, or of her figure by the fashion of her costume." And Mlle. Poisson records that she "showed most remarkable taste and invariably opposed to the mode of the time." She seems indeed to have had some claim to be considered the arbitrix of feminine taste in dress, for the *Mercuré galant* of 1673 ascribes to her the credit of a radical reform in ladies' toilettes, nothing less than the substitution of gowns, "*tout unis sur le corps, de la manière que la taille parait plus belle*," for the majestic but somewhat heavy costume hitherto in vogue, which concealed beneath its too ample folds the graceful lines of the figure.

If Armande, as a woman, was an object of admiration to her contemporaries, as an actress, she aroused in them something very like enthusiasm. It would indeed have been a matter for surprise had it been otherwise, since she enjoyed advantages which fall to the lot of very few. She came of a family which had already contributed

several finished performers to the French stage, and "had in her blood the passion and instinct of the theatre." With her charm of manner and exquisite taste in dress, she combined many accomplishments: "she had a very pretty voice, sang with great taste in both French and Italian, and danced ravishingly." She had received a long and careful training from one who was perhaps an even better teacher than he was an actor, and who was as ambitious for her success as for his own. And, finally, nearly all her parts—certainly all her more important parts—were written by Molière with the express object of enabling her to display her abilities to the best advantage.

Lacking the dignity and strength required to give adequate expression to the greater passions, she wisely refrained from attempting any important rôles in tragedy, and in Racine's *Alexandre* and the *Attila* of Corneille we find her allotted only minor parts. But at the Palais-Royal comedy was, of course, the staple fare, and in "*les rôles de femmes coquettes et satiriques*," which accorded so well with her own temperament, and also in those of *ingénues*, Armande had no superior in her day and probably very few since. Her acting is said to have been characterised by great judgment, while her by-play was remarkably effective. "If she but retouches her hair, or rearranges her ribbons or her jewellery, these little fashions conceal a satire judicious and natural, and throw ridicule upon the women she wishes to represent." Moreover, she had the rare gift of being able to change at will the character of her voice, and "had a different tone for every part she undertook."

Molière's wise reluctance to allow his young wife to challenge the verdict of the public until he had done

everything in his power to ensure her success, delayed Armande's first appearance on the stage for fifteen months after her marriage, when she made her *début* as Élise in the *Critique de l'École des femmes* (June 1, 1663), a reply to the attacks of Donneau de Visé and other critics upon the play produced at the Palais-Royal the previous December. The part allotted to her, which is that of a self-possessed young woman, with a good deal of shrewd common-sense, a turn for irony of a rather caustic brand, and not too much consideration for the feelings of others, suited her admirably—perhaps rather more so than poor Molière at that time imagined—and secured her a somewhat similar rôle in the delightful *Impromptu de Versailles*, played before the Court in the following October, where she figures in the cast as a "satirical wit." She did not play in the *Mariage forcé* (January 29, 1664), as, ten days earlier, she had borne Molière a son, to whom, as we have mentioned, Louis XIV. and Henrietta of England stood sponsors; but in the following spring we find her in the first of her long list of important rôles.

At the beginning of May 1664, Louis XIV. entertained the Queen-mother, Anne of Austria, and his own consort, Maria Theresa, with a brilliant and sumptuous fête, or rather succession of fêtes, at Versailles, which was then, of course, still only the little country-house built by Louis XIII., occupying to-day the bottom of the Cour de Marbre. The fêtes, which were denominated *Les Plaisirs de l'Île enchantée*, as the plan adopted was suggested by the sixth and seventh cantos of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which describe the sojourn of Rogero (impersonated by the King) in the isle and palace of the enchantress Alcena, began on the 7th of the month and

lasted a week; stately processions, tilting, displays of fireworks, balls, and magnificent banquets alternating with theatrical performances. On the 8th, Molière's troupe gave a comedy ballet, called the *Princesse d'Élide*, composed for the occasion, by their chief, at the special request of the King, and the rôle of the princess was taken by Armande. The play, the subject of which was borrowed from the Spanish dramatist Moreto's *El Desden con el Desden* (Scorn for Scorn), is the story of a fair princess, who until then had professed to despise love and had driven her innumerable suitors to despair, but who suddenly finds herself wounded to the heart by the skilfully feigned indifference to her charms shown by Euryale, Prince of Ithaca, who ultimately succeeds in winning her hand. Though far from being one of Molière's happiest efforts, as it was hastily strung together—the first act and the commencement of the first scene of the second are in verse, and the rest in prose—while the author's natural flow of wit and humour was checked by the necessity of accommodating himself to courtly conventions, it met with a very favourable reception, and, moreover, served to establish Armande's reputation as an actress. This was, no doubt, Molière's intention, as the whole play appears to have been conceived expressly to bring into relief the young lady's various accomplishments—her taste in dress, her charming voice, and her graceful dancing—and the enamoured Euryale declaims in her honour a portrait of the most flattering description: "She is, in truth, adorable at all times; but at that moment she was more so than ever, and new charms redoubled the splendour of her beauty. Never was her face adorned with more lovely colours; never were her eyes armed with swifter



or more piercing shafts. The sweetness of her voice showed itself in the perfectly charming air which she deigned to sing; and the marvellous tones she uttered penetrated to the very depth of my soul and held all my senses in a rapture from which they were powerless to escape. She next showed a disposition altogether divine; her lovely feet on the enamel of the soft turf danced delightful steps, which carried me quite beyond myself and bound me by irresistible bonds to the easy and accurate movements with which her whole body followed those harmonious motions."

On the three concluding days of the fêtes, the *Fâcheux*, the first three acts of *Tartuffe*, and the *Mariage forcé* were in turn represented. It is uncertain what parts were allotted Armande in the first and third of these plays, but in the much discussed *Tartuffe*, now played for the first time, she again filled the leading feminine rôle. How she fared on this occasion we have unfortunately no information; but when, in February 1669, the interdict under which *Tartuffe* had so long lain was at length withdrawn and the piece produced at the Palais-Royal, the rhyming chronicle of Robinet speaks in eulogistic terms of her performance of Elmire.

In the meanwhile, she had successfully created other important parts: Lucinde in the *Medecin malgré lui*, Angélique in *George Dandin*, and Elise in *l'Avare*, and, on June 4, 1666, the greatest of all her triumphs—the rôle of Célimène in the famous comedy of the *Misanthrope*.

"Célimène," says M. Larroumet, "is the type of woman the most original and the most complete which the genius of Molière has evolved. Eternal temptation of actresses, those who have attempted it may be called legion, those who have succeeded in making themselves

mistresses of it form a select group, admired, envied. Such an actress of genius as Rachel failed here miserably, and a true Célimène, like Mlle. Mars, is sure of transmitting her name to posterity. One has noted, however, the tones and gestures of the great interpreters of the part; tradition preserves them, and they point out the way. But an intelligent pupil will readily make herself acquainted with all that can be learned; if she does not evolve from her own resources the sentiment of the character, she will only swell the alarming number of vain attempts which theatrical history records. Célimène is twenty years of age, and her experience is that of a woman of forty. Coquettish and feline with Alceste, frivolous and back-biting with the little marquises, cruelly ironical with Arsinoé, in each act, in each scene, she shows herself under a different aspect. Contemporary, or very nearly so, of Mesdames de Châtillon, de Luynes, de Monaco, de Soubise, and the nieces of Mazarin, she ought to awaken a vague memory of these great names; she is the exquisite and rare product of an aristocratic civilisation in the full splendour of its development, and often she speaks a language of almost plebeian candour and acerbity. In the salon where she reigns, she ought to convey the idea of perfect ease and supreme distinction; and in the *dénouement* she submits to a cruel humiliation without the possibility of revenge; she makes her exit vanquished at all points, and, even then, she ought to lose nothing of her haughty bearing and her tranquil smile.”<sup>1</sup>

It will thus be readily understood that an actress who could be trusted to create such a part must have truly been a great artist, and Armande secured a brilliant

<sup>1</sup> *La Comédie de Molière*, p. 134.

triumph. Her performance was "a charm" and "an ecstasy," Robinet tells us; and though Robinet was in the habit of dealing somewhat freely in such expressions, we have no reason to doubt that on this occasion he faithfully reflects the opinion of the audience.

But, after all, we can hardly wonder at the young actress's success, since she had only to be perfectly natural to realise the author's whole idea of his heroine. For what is Célimène but a finished portrait of Armande herself? Célimène is "*la grande coquette par excellence*," surrounded by a crowd of admirers wherever she goes. Armande, unhappily for Molière's peace of mind, seems to have enjoyed very much the same reputation. Célimène depends for her fascination not so much on beauty of face or form as on her expression, her smile, her manners, her conversation; "*elle a l'art de me plaire*," says the infatuated Alceste. Armande possessed the same kind of attractions, and was "very affecting when she wished to please." Célimène is haughty and imperious. "It is my wish; it is my wish," she cries when Alceste hesitates to comply with her demands. "Armande," says a contemporary, "could not brook contradiction, and pretended that a lover ought to be as submissive as a slave." In fact, so perfect is the resemblance that even if the circumstances, of which we shall presently speak, did not preclude all reasonable doubt about the matter, few would be found to deny that the heroine of the *Misanthrope* was drawn from life.

Among Armande's other rôles may be mentioned the capricious and charming Lucile of the *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, in which Molière drew the well-known portrait of his wife which we have already cited; the title-part in the famous "tragedy-ballet" of *Psyché*, one

of the most remarkable instances of collaboration in dramatic history,<sup>1</sup> in which she appeared in a different costume in each of its five acts—a very unusual extravagance in those days—and is described by the enthusiastic Robinet as “marvellous” and “playing divinely”; Henriette in the *Femmes savantes*, “the model of an honest, sensible, and well-brought-up young lady;” and finally, Angélique in Molière’s swan-song, the *Malade imaginaire*, perhaps, next to Célimène, her most finished impersonation.

But great as were the dramatic talents of Armande Béjart, they count for comparatively little in the curiosity which her name arouses. It is her moral character, her private life, her relations with her famous husband, which have exercised the minds of the biographers of Molière for upwards of two centuries. On these matters even more ink has been expended than on the vexed question of her birth, and with far less satisfactory results. To the great majority of writers Armande was an unworthy wife, who repaid the kindness and affection lavished upon her by the great man whose name she bore with ingratitude and contumely; while there are not wanting those who go so far as to accuse her of the grossest infidelity, and to assert that her misconduct was in some measure responsible for the dramatist’s untimely death. When, however, we come to sift the evidence against her, we shall find that these extreme views are based on very insufficient or very

<sup>1</sup> Molière was responsible for the plot, the prologue, the first act, and the first scenes of the second and third acts; Quinault contributed all the lyrical matter, with the exception of the Italian plainte, which, like the music, was by Lulli; Pierre Corneille wrote the rest.

suspicious testimony, and that one thing only has been clearly established, namely, that she rendered Molière's later years very unhappy. But what was the true cause of his unhappiness, whether occasioned by actual misconduct on the part of Armande, or merely by an ever present dread that such must be the inevitable termination of one or other of the very imprudent flirtations in which she appears to have been continually indulging, is very difficult, nay, well-nigh impossible, to determine.

It has always been a favourite practice with biographers of Molière and historians of the French theatre to affect to discover more or less direct allusions to the dramatist's relations with his wife in several of his plays: the *École des femmes*, the *Impromptu de Versailles*, the *Mariage forcé*, *George Dandin*, and, of course, the *Misanthrope*. That this is true of the last-named play cannot, we think, be disputed; but in regard to the others, we are inclined to believe that the significance of the passages and episodes on which their contention rests have been a good deal exaggerated.

Let us begin with the *École des femmes*, the first in chronological order. Here, as in the *École des maris*, Molière turns to the ethics of marriage for his materials. Arnolphe, a middle-aged bachelor, disgusted by the lack of fidelity among the married women he sees around him, comes to the conclusion that the only safeguard of a wife's honour is extreme ignorance. No young woman should know anything beyond her household and religious duties; her reading is to be confined to the Bible and the Maxims of Marriage; her only objects in life are to be the salvation of her soul and the comfort and happiness of her husband. In order to put his theory to the test, he adopts a little girl called Agnès,

and has her carefully brought up in the most complete seclusion, with the intention of making her his wife when she shall have reached a suitable age. But, unfortunately for him—for he falls genuinely in love with his ward—the damsel's very simplicity proves his undoing; she bestows her affections upon a young gallant, Horace by name, and poor Arnolphe is left lamenting the downfall of his hopes.

We have outlined this plot of the play, which is doubtless familiar to many, as several writers have assumed that Molière has depicted himself in the rôle of Arnolphe and Armande in that of Agnès; but beyond the fact that both Molière and his hero themselves supervised the education of their intended wives, there does not seem to be the slightest ground for such a supposition. In the first place, Molière espoused the woman of his choice; while Arnolphe sees his cherished scheme come to nothing, through the appearance on the scene of the youthful Horace. In the second, the brilliant and witty Armande bears as little resemblance to the unsophisticated Agnès as does her liberal-minded husband to the tyrannical guardian. And, lastly, to ask us to believe that only ten months after his marriage, with the glamour of the honeymoon still upon him, Molière could have intended an unsympathetic character like Agnès to represent his wife, is to make too great a call upon our credulity.

In the *Impromptu de Versailles* a good deal has been made of the little quarrel between the author and his wife, which the former introduces at the beginning of the play. The company is supposed to be rehearsing a new comedy, commanded by the King at two hours' notice, and to be causing its chief no little trouble.

*Mademoiselle Molière*.—"Shall I tell you what it is? You ought to have written a play which you could have acted all alone."

*Molière*.—"Be silent, wife; you are a fool."

*Mademoiselle Molière*.—"Thank you, my lord and husband; that just shows what it is to be married, and how strangely wedlock alters people. You would not have said that eighteen months ago."

*Molière*.—"Pray be silent."

*Mademoiselle Molière*.—"It is an odd thing that a trifling ceremony should be capable of depriving us of all our good qualities, and that a husband and a lover should regard the same person with such different eyes."

*Molière*.—"What loquacity!"

*Mademoiselle Molière*.—"Faith! if I were to write a play, it would be upon that subject. I would justify women in many things of which they are accused, and I would make husbands afraid of the contrast between their abrupt manners and the courtesy of lovers."

Here, we are told by certain critics, the inference is unmistakable; Molière clearly foresees the fate which awaits him. In our opinion, they are wrong. In the *Impromptu de Versailles*, Molière and his wife do not, as in an ordinary play, represent fictitious characters; they appear under their own names. In these circumstances, it is surely inconceivable that the dramatist should have introduced this dialogue, if he had for one moment imagined it applicable to his own affairs! The very fact that he was so ready to jest upon such a subject seems to us a conclusive proof that up to that time, at least, Armande's conduct had given him but scant cause for uneasiness.

The *Mariage forcé* and *George Dandin*, the former

produced early in the year 1664, when the difference of age and of character between Molière and his wife was no doubt beginning to produce its fatal consequences, and the latter in the summer of 1667, after their separation, of which we shall speak in due course, had actually taken place, contain more direct allusions to their author's *ménage*. Sganarelle, like Molière, had believed himself "*le plus content des hommes*," only to be roughly disillusioned when the carefully brought up Dorimène frankly avows her passion for "*toutes les choses de plaisir*"—play, visiting, assemblies, entertainments, and so forth—at the same time expressing a hope that he does not intend to be one of those inconvenient husbands who desire their wives to live "*comme des loup-garous*," since solitude drives her to despair, but that they may dwell together as a pair "*qui savent leur monde*." Angélique, in her turn, complains to George Dandin of the tyranny exercised by husbands "who wish their wives to be dead to all amusements, and to live only for them." She has no desire, she tells him, to die young, but "intends to enjoy, under his good pleasure, some of the glad days that youth has to offer her, to take advantage of the sweet liberties that the age permits her, to see a little of the *beau monde*, and to taste the pleasure of hearing her praises sung."

All this is certainly reminiscent of Armande, who, according to Grimarest, was no sooner married than she "believed herself a duchess," affected a coquettish manner with the idle gallants who flocked to pay court to her, and turned a deaf ear to the warnings of her husband, whose lessons appeared to her "too severe for a young person who, besides, had nothing wherewith to reproach herself." But the resemblance in the situations



goes no further. If Dorimène, in her craving for "*toutes les choses de plaisir*," and Angélique, in her imperious temper and cold irony, bear some relation to Armande, the foolish and cowardly Sganarelle, who allows himself to be cudgelled by Dorimène's brother, Lycidas, into a marriage which he knows must bring him unhappiness, has nothing, save his age, in common with Molière; while the aspiring farmer, George Dandin, marrying not for love, but for social position, and deservedly punished for his snobbishness, is as far removed from his creator as Tartuffe or Monsieur Jourdain.

When we come to the *Misanthrope*, the similarity between fiction and reality is too striking to admit of any doubt as to the author's intentions. It is true that a distinguished English critic<sup>1</sup> professes to see in this play, as in *Don Garcie de Navarre*—Molière's one failure, produced the year before his marriage, and withdrawn after a run of five nights—the outcome of the actor-dramatist's "desire of indulging his humour of seriousness and a determination to example his elocutionary theories in verse that, without being actually tragic and heroic, should have something in it of the tragic and heroic quality." But, though the large number of verses from *Don Garcie* which Molière has incorporated with his rôle of Alceste would seem to lend some confirmation to this theory, the fact remains that writers are practically unanimous in regarding the *Misanthrope* as, primarily, a pathetic autobiography of its author under the cloak of fiction. "This Célimène, so frivolous and so charming, so dangerous and so seductive, this incorrigible coquette, who does not understand what a noble heart she is wounding even unto death:

<sup>1</sup> Mr. W. E. Henley in the *Cornhill Magazine*, xli. 445.

is not this Armande Béjart, embellished by all the love and all the genius of Molière? And Alceste; who is he? At the first representations people believed that they recognised the Duc de Montausier, and the Duc de Montausier remarked, with good reason: 'I thank you; it is a great honour.' But we, for our part, recognise Molière. This misanthrope is something more than an honourable gentleman at odds with the world. He is a great genius misunderstood, who endures and waits; he is a passionate sage, an honest man with a great and excellent heart."<sup>1</sup>

In the *Misanthrope*, Molière has given to Célimène all the coquetry, the egoism, and the caustic wit which belonged to Armande; to his own rôle all the weakness of a high-minded man struggling vainly against his passion for an unworthy object. "The love I bear for her," says Alceste—

"Ne ferme point mes yeux aux défauts qu'on lui trouve ;  
Et je suis, quelque ardeur qu'elle m'ait pu donner,  
Le premier à les voir, comme à les condamner.  
Mais, avec tout cela, quoi que je puis faire,  
Je confesse mon foible ; elle a l'art de me plaire ;  
J'ai beau voir ses défauts, et j'ai beau l'en blâmer,  
En dépit qu'on en ait, elle se fait aimer ;  
Sa grâce est la plus forte, et, sans doute, ma flamme  
De ces vices du temps pourra purger son âme."

There are moments indeed in the play when it almost ceases to belong to the realm of fiction. The scene, for instance, in the fourth act, when Alceste, holding in his hand the proof of Célimène's perfidy, the letter written by her to his rival, Oronte, calls upon her "to justify herself at least of a crime that overwhelms him,"

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau's *Les comédiennes adorées*, 269.

and to do her best to appear faithful, while he, on his side, will do his best to believe her such ; and Célimène tartly refuses—

“ Allez, vous êtes fou, dans vos transports jaloux,  
Et ne méritez pas l’amour qu’on a pour vous.

Allez, de tels soupçons méritent ma colère,  
Et vous ne valez pas que l’on vous considère :  
Je suis sotté, et veux mal à ma simplicité,  
De conserver, encor, pour vous, quelque bonté ;  
Je devrois, autre part, attacher mon estime  
Et vous faire un sujet de plainte légitime,”

may well have had its parallel in their own lives. And few, again, can doubt the sincerity with which the lover must have uttered the lines,—

“ Je fais tout mon possible  
À rompre de ce cœur l’attachement terrible ;  
Mais mes plus grands efforts n’ont rien fait jusqu’ici,  
Et c’est pour mes péchés que je vous aime ainsi.”

“ We might well say without exaggeration of this Célimène,” remarks August Wilhelm von Schlegel,<sup>1</sup> “ that there is not a single good point in her whole composition.” This may be so ; but, as M. Larroumet is careful to point out, there is really nothing in the *Misanthrope* which gives us the right to assume that Armande was anything worse than an incorrigible coquette. “ Célimène is impeccable ; she has neither heart nor feeling.”<sup>2</sup> Nor do the remainder of Molière’s plays furnish any fresh proof against Armande ; they, on the contrary, strengthen the impression that, while he suffered much from his wife’s character, he never

<sup>1</sup> “ Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature.”

<sup>2</sup> *La Comédie de Molière*, p. 146.

believed her to have been guilty of anything which might affect his honour.

This impression seems to have been that of the poet's contemporaries. Molière had, as we know, many enemies—unscrupulous enemies, who did not hesitate to launch against him the most hideous of accusations. We can hardly doubt that had there been any reasonable ground for believing Armande guilty of something more than coquetry, the Montfleurys, Le Boulanger de Chalussay and the rest, would have been only too ready to avail themselves of such an opportunity of humiliating the man whom they so bitterly hated. Yet though, like all the rest of the world, they were aware of Molière's jealous nature, and made this weakness the object of their unsparing ridicule, none of them went so far as to accuse him of being that which he appears to have been in incessant dread of becoming. At most, their works contain only vague hints and insinuations, to which little or no attention seems to have been paid; and it is probable that Armande's name would have gone down to posterity without any very serious stain upon it, had she not chanced to be made the victim of one of the most audacious and malignant libels ever penned.

Among the swarm of scurrilous brochures, fictitious histories, and stupid romances in the French language which issued from the foreign press during the decade which followed the Protestant emigration of 1685, was a little book, or rather pamphlet, written for the delectation of those persons who are always ready to welcome anything calculated to gratify their curiosity about the private affairs of stage celebrities. This book, published anonymously at Frankfort, in 1688, by one Rottenberg, a bookseller who made a speciality of such

sensational works,<sup>1</sup> bore the title of *La Fameuse Comédienne, ou Histoire de la Guérin*, Guérin being the name of Armande Béjart's second husband, whom she married in 1677. Although the demand for it was considerable, and five editions were printed within ten years of the date of its publication, the charges against Armande which it contained do not appear to have been taken very seriously, except among the class of readers for whom it was written, until, in 1697, it occurred to Bayle, who had a weakness for piquant anecdotes about notable persons, to include certain passages in his famous Dictionary, since which few of the biographers of Molière have failed to borrow more or less freely from its pages, with most unfortunate results to the reputation of the dramatist's wife.

The authorship of the *Fameuse Comédienne* remains a mystery to this day, though contemporary gossip, or historians in search of some new sensation, have attri-

<sup>1</sup> The first edition, now very rare, a copy of which is in the possession of the British Museum, contains a "foreword" from the bookseller to the reader, which is so curious that we make no apology for transcribing it:

"I know neither the author of this history, nor the hand from whence it came to me. A courier who, in passing through this town, purchased some books at my shop, made me a present of it, and assured me that it is true in every detail. I believe it to be incumbent upon me to give this present to the public, in order that it may share the principal adventures of this famous actress, as celebrated by her coquetry as by the reputation of the late Molière, her first husband.

"The same courier assured me that the author of this history has included therein only the chief adventures which happened to this actress, having passed over an infinity of other little amorous incidents, as trifles unworthy of his book or his heroine. I am persuaded that there is not an actress in France whose career would not afford sufficient material for a similar history. But, while we await their appearance, I give you this one, precisely as it came into my hands, without adding or subtracting anything. May it afford you diversion! Adieu."

buted it successively to a number of persons: La Fontaine, Racine, Chapelle, Blot, the *chansonnier* of the Fronde, Rosimont, an actor of the Rue Guénégaud, Mlle. Guyot, a member of the same company, and Mlle. Boudin, a provincial actress, who would appear to have been at one time on terms of intimacy with Armande. With regard to the first five of these suppositions, we will merely remark that neither La Fontaine, Racine, nor Chapelle were capable of committing such an infamy; that Blot had been in his grave more than thirty years at the time of the publication of the libel ascribed to him, and that the chief argument advanced by M. Charles Livet, the editor of the latest edition of the *Fameuse Comédienne*, in favour of Rosimont, namely, a resemblance between the style of the book and a theological work entitled *La Vie des Saints*, which he published in 1680, seems to us too fanciful to merit any serious consideration. In the cases of Mesdemoiselles Guyot and Boudin, there is again a total absence of anything like adequate proof; nevertheless, though they are both in all probability guiltless, strong grounds exist for believing the book to be the work of one of Armande's professional rivals, as the intimate acquaintance with theatrical life which it reveals precludes all doubt as to the vocation of the writer; while the preponderating place it allots to women, the manner in which it speaks of men, the jealous hatred which inspires it, the *finesse* of some of its remarks, its style and method, all denote a feminine hand.<sup>1</sup>

Atrocious libel though the *Fameuse Comédienne* undoubtedly is, it is very far from destitute of that literary merit in which even the works of the most obscure writers of the great epoch of French prose are seldom lacking, and,

<sup>1</sup> M. Gustave Larroumet, *La Comédie de Molière*, p. 149.

moreover, contains not a little interesting and authentic information about the public career of Molière and his wife. But that is all that can be said in its favour. "Possessed," remarks M. Larroumet, "by a ferocious hatred against Armande, hatred of the woman and the actress, the writer has only one object—to render her odious. What she knows of the actions of her enemy she perverts or, at any rate, exaggerates; what she does not know she invents. He who wishes to injure a man attributes to him acts of indecency or cowardice; he who wishes to injure a woman gives her lovers; these are the surest means. Thus our author makes of Armande a Messalina, and a Messalina of the baser sort, one who sells her favours."

Unfortunately for the object which the libeller has in view, she does not content herself with general charges; she makes formal accusations, which she endeavours to substantiate, and the book abounds in letters, conversations, details about matters which could not possibly have been known, save to the parties immediately concerned, with the result that her attack fails miserably, and the judicious reader very speedily perceives that the work is nothing but a collection of scandalous anecdotes, which, when not controverted by positive facts, sin grievously against probability.

However, as all readers are not judicious, and as the book has imposed on several historians of deservedly high reputation,<sup>1</sup> it may be as well for us, in the interests

<sup>1</sup> Among the writers who accept wholly, or in part, the statements of *La Fameuse Comédienne* may be mentioned Grimarest, Taschereau, M. Loiseleur, and Gaboriau, though the last-named writer ought not perhaps to be taken very seriously. The article on Armande in Mr. Sutherland Edwards's "Idols of the French Stage"—hitherto, we believe, the only attempt to give any detailed account of the actress in English—is admittedly largely based on the information contained in this libel.

of truth, to follow the example of M. Bazin and M. Larroumet, and devote some little space to an examination of the charges which have brought so much unmerited odium upon the memory of Armande Béjart.

The first lover attributed to Armande is the Abbé de Richelieu, great-nephew of the famous cardinal, a gentleman of a very gallant disposition, with a marked predilection for actresses: "There was no one at the Court who did not endeavour to gain her favours. The Abbé de Richelieu was one of the first who determined to make her his mistress. As he was very liberal, while the young lady was very fond of expenditure, the matter was soon concluded. It was agreed that he should give her four pistoles (about forty francs) a day, without counting clothes and entertainments. The abbé did not fail to send her every morning, by a page, the pledge of their treaty, and to go and visit her every afternoon."

Now, as M. Larroumet points out, if this story is to be accepted, we must either believe Molière to have been ignorant of the comings and goings of the page and the abbé, or that he was aware of and tolerated them: two suppositions equally inadmissible. Moreover, if we consult the dates, the improbability becomes an impossibility. Armande was married on February 20, 1662, and on January 19, 1664, she bore Molière a son. The intrigue must then have taken place between these two periods—which is to make her infidelity begin at a very early date—since M. Bazin tells us that the Abbé de Richelieu left France in March 1664 with the expedition organised to defend Hungary against the Turks, and died at Venice on January 9, 1665. That, however, does not prevent the *Fameuse Comédienne* from making his *liaison* with Mlle. Molière last until the



production of the *Princesse d'Élide*; a play which was not performed until May 8, 1664, some weeks after his departure.

On to the supposed intrigue between Armande and the abbé, the anonymous author next proceeds to graft a new and double adventure: "This affair lasted for some months without trouble; but Molière having written the *Princesse d'Élide*, in which the Molière played the princess, which was the first important rôle she had filled, because Mademoiselle du Parc played them all and was the heroine of the theatre, she created such a sensation that Molière had cause to repent of having exhibited her in the midst of the brilliant young men of the Court. For scarcely had she arrived at Chambord, where the King gave this entertainment, than she became infatuated with the Comte de Guiche,<sup>1</sup> while the Comte de Lauzun<sup>2</sup> became infatuated with her. The latter spared no effort to obtain her good graces, but the Molière, who had quite lost her head over her hero, would listen to no proposition, and contented herself with visiting Du Parc and weeping over the indifference of the Comte de Guiche. The Comte de Lauzun, however, did not abandon hope, experience having taught him that nothing could resist him. He knew, moreover, that the Comte de Guiche was one who set but little store by woman's love, for which reason he

<sup>1</sup> Armand de Gramont, Comte de Guiche, brother of Philibert de Gramont, the hero of Count Hamilton's Memoirs.

<sup>2</sup> Antoine Nompar de Caumont, Comte, and afterwards Duc, de Lauzun, the beloved of *la Grande Mademoiselle*, who so nearly succeeded in securing the hand and vast possessions of that princess, and who, in November 1671, was imprisoned at Pignerol, where he remained ten years. For an account of his adventures, see the author's "Madame de Montespan" (London, Harpers: New York, Scribners: 1903).

doubted not that his indifference would end by repulsing the Molière, and that his own star would then produce in her heart what it had produced in those of all the women whom he had sought to please. He was not deceived, for the Molière, irritated by the coldness of the Comte de Guiche, threw herself into the arms of the Comte de Lauzun, as if desirous of seeking protection against further suffering at the hands of a man who failed to appreciate her."

Here again we have an impossibility and an improbability. In May 1664 the Comte de Guiche was at Warsaw, having been exiled the previous year, on account of his complicity in the "Spanish letter" plot against Mlle. de la Vallière, and, therefore, could not have been making love—or being made love to—at Versailles. As for Lauzun, no mention of him is to be found among the persons who assisted at the fêtes where the *Princesse d'Élide* was performed, while even if he were present, it is very unlikely that he had any attention to spare for Mlle. Molière, as he was at this time desperately in love with the Princesse de Monaco, who afterwards jilted him for the King himself. The fact is that the malicious chronicler, having decided to give her victim some *grands seigneurs* as lovers, not unnaturally selected those most celebrated for their gallantry, in the belief that, among their numerous mistresses, one more would pass without difficulty; but she had little acquaintance with the Court, and her ignorance has betrayed her.

Although the Abbé de Richelieu had, as we have mentioned, departed for Hungary, the *Fameuse Comédienne* retains him on the stage and makes him play a particularly odious rôle. He intercepts a very tender letter

written by Armande to the Comte de Guiche, and, furious at the lady's duplicity, "does not amuse himself by uttering reproaches, which never serve any good purpose; but, congratulating himself on having engaged her only by the day, resolves to break with her from that moment, which he does, after calling Molière's attention to the fact that the great care he took to please the public left him no time for examining the conduct of his own wife, and that while he worked to divert every one, every one worked to divert her."

A bitter matrimonial quarrel naturally follows this confidence. Armande sheds floods of tears, confesses her *tendresse* for Guiche, but protests that she is guilty in intention only, carefully refrains from saying a word about Lauzun, entreats her deluded husband's pardon, which she obtains with very little difficulty, and profits by his credulity to continue her intrigues "with more *éclat* than ever." Wearying of sentimental or quasi-sentimental attachments, she resolves to profit by her charms, at the same time making a great pretence of chastity and "causing to sigh for her an infinity of fools who imagine her to be of unexampled virtue." However, in due course, Molière is advised of her proceedings, and another painful scene takes place between husband and wife. Molière falls into a violent passion and threatens to have her shut up in a convent. Armande weeps, swoons away, and appears to be on the point of expiring; but eventually revives and, instead of entreating pardon, as on the previous occasion, takes a high tone, accuses her husband of keeping up his intimacy with Mlle. de Brie, who, by a singular arrangement, still continued to reside under

the same roof as her former lover,<sup>1</sup> and also with Madeleine Béjart, declares that she "no longer has the courage to live with him, that she would rather die, and that everything between them must come to an end." In vain her family, that of Molière, and their common friends endeavour to appease her. "She conceives henceforth a terrible aversion for her husband, she treats him with the utmost contempt; finally, she carries matters to such an extremity that Molière, beginning to perceive her evil propensities, consents to the rupture which, since their quarrel, she has never ceased to demand; and, accordingly, without any decree of the Parliament, they agree that they will no longer live together."

Here, at last, the author of the *Fameuse Comédienne* is on sure ground; for we know, on unimpeachable authority, that an "amicable" separation did actually take place between Molière and his wife. Its precise date is a matter of some uncertainty, but it must have been subsequent to the month of April 1665, when Armande presented her husband with a second child, a daughter, to whom Madeleine Béjart and the Comte de Modène stood sponsors. "If," says M. Larroumet, "we admit that the *Misanthrope* reflects something of the poet's state of mind and of his feelings towards

<sup>1</sup> When Molière married, he went to live in the Rue de Richelieu. In the following year, however, he removed to the Béjarts' house situated at the corner of the Rue Saint-Thomas du Louvre and the Place du Palais-Royal. It was a very large house, capable of accommodating two or three families, and Mlle. de Brie had for some time occupied part of it. Molière's object in residing there seems to have been to allow his young wife to enjoy the society of her family, but there can be no doubt that he committed a very grave mistake in residing under the same roof as a woman with whom he had formerly had a *liaison*.

his wife, the separation perhaps belongs to the moment when this play was produced, in June 1666, or later, about the month of August, after the *Médecin malgré lui*." M. Larroumet sees in the circumstance that the leading feminine parts in the three plays which followed the *Médecin malgré lui*: *Mélicerte*, *Le Sicilien*, and *Amphitryon*, were allotted to Mlle. de Brie, and not to Armande—a distribution which must have been peculiarly galling to the latter, who had so long filled the most important or the most flattering rôles—a natural effect of her husband's resentment.

From the moment of their rupture until their reconciliation, some five years later, husband and wife met no more, except at the theatre. Armande remained in Paris, with her mother and sister; while Molière passed most of his rare leisure at a little country-house which he rented at Auteuil, then, as now, one of the most beautiful suburbs of Paris. One day, according to the *Fameuse Comédienne*, he was sitting in his garden, musing sadly upon his lost happiness, when his friend Chapelle broke in upon his solitude, and, finding him in a more than usually despondent mood, began to reproach him with betraying a weakness which he had so often turned to ridicule upon the stage.

"For my part," said he, "if I were unfortunate enough to find myself in like case to you, and that the person I loved granted favours to others, I should feel such a contempt for her as would infallibly cure me of my passion. Moreover, there is a satisfaction open to you, which would be denied you if she were only your mistress; and that vengeance which commonly takes the place of love in an outraged heart can compensate you for all the mortifications your wife occasions you, since you

can at once have her shut up in a convent. This would, indeed, be a sure means of placing your mind at rest."

Molière, who had listened quietly to his friend, here interrupted him to inquire whether he himself had never loved.

"Yes," replied Chapelle, "I have been in love as a man of sense ought to be, but I should never have found any difficulty in following what honour prescribed; and I blush to find you in such a state of indecision in regard to this matter."

"I see well," rejoined Molière, "that you have never truly loved. You take the semblance of love for love itself. I might give you many examples which would demonstrate to you the strength of this passion; but I will merely give you a faithful account of my own trouble, that you may understand how little we are masters of ourselves when once it has acquired dominion over us. As for the consummate knowledge of the human heart which you say the portraits I am constantly offering to the public prove me to possess, I will acknowledge that I have endeavoured to understand its weakness. But, if my science has taught me that danger should be avoided, my experience convinces me but too thoroughly that to escape it is impossible. I judge daily by my own case.

"I am by nature of an excessively tender disposition, and all my efforts have never enabled me to overcome my inclinations towards love. I sought to render myself happy, that is to say, so far as might be with a sensitive heart. I was convinced that few women are deserving of sincere affection; that interest, ambition, and vanity are at the root of all their intrigues. I thought, however, to secure my happiness by the innocence of my choice.

I took my wife, so to speak, from the cradle. I educated her with the care which has given rise to the rumours which have doubtless reached your ears. I had persuaded myself that I could inspire her by habit with sentiments that time alone could destroy, and I neglected nothing whereby this end could be attained. As she was still young when I married her, I was unaware of her evil propensities, and deemed myself a little less unfortunate than the majority of those who contract such engagements. Thus marriage did not lessen my affection; but she treated me with such indifference that I began to perceive that all my precautions had been unavailing, and that her feelings towards me were very far removed from what I desired for my happiness. I reproached myself with a sensitiveness which seemed ridiculous in a husband, ascribing to her disposition that which was really due to her want of affection for me. But I had but too many opportunities of perceiving my error; and the mad passion which she contracted soon afterwards for the Comte de Guiche occasioned too much commotion to leave me even this appearance of tranquillity. I spared no endeavour, so soon as I knew the truth, to conquer myself, finding it impossible to change her. I employed all the strength of mind that I could command. I summoned to my aid everything that could help to console me. I considered her as a person whose sole merit had lain in her innocence, and whose unfaithfulness robbed her of all her charms. I resolved henceforth to live with her as an honourable man whose wife is a coquette, and who is well persuaded that, whatever may be said, his reputation is not affected by the misconduct of his spouse. But I had the mortification to discover that a woman without great beauty,

who owed what little intelligence she possessed to the education which I had given her, could, in an instant, destroy all my philosophy. Her presence made me forget all my resolutions ; the first words she said in her defence left me so convinced that my suspicions were ill-founded that I asked pardon of her for having been so credulous.

“ However, my kindness effected no change in her, and, in the end, I determined to live with her as if she were not my wife ; but if you knew what I suffer you would pity me. My passion has reached such a point as to cause me to sympathise with her ; and when I reflect upon the impossibility of suppressing what I feel for her, I tell myself, at the same time, that she has perhaps a similar difficulty in overcoming her inclination towards coquetry, and I find myself more disposed to pity than to blame her.

“ No doubt you will tell me that one must be a poet to love in this manner, but, for my part, I hold that there is only one kind of love, and that those who have not felt such tenderness have never truly loved. Everything in this world is associated in my mind with her. So entirely are my thoughts occupied by her that in her absence nothing can give me pleasure. When I behold her, an emotion, transports which may be felt but not expressed, deprive me of all power of reflection. I have no longer eyes for her faults, but see only her lovable qualities. Is not this the last extremity of folly ? And do you not marvel that all my reason serves only to convince me of my weakness without giving me the strength to master it ? ”

Quite a number of writers, including several who are inclined to place but little confidence in the rest of the



*Fameuse Comédienne*, pronounce unhesitatingly for the genuineness of the above conversation. M. Edouard Fournier thinks that a letter from Molière to Chapelle has been worked into the text,<sup>1</sup> while Mr. Gegg Markheim, in his very interesting preface to the Clarendon Press edition of the *Misanthrope*, is of opinion that a conversation between the two poets was repeated by Chapelle, "either thoughtlessly or to clear his friend from certain slanders," and reached the ears of the author. Mr. Markheim adduces two circumstances as proofs of the genuineness of the Auteuil confession: first, that the substance of it is confirmed by a similar conversation between Molière and his friends, the physician Rohault, and Mignard, the celebrated painter, cited by Grimarest, in his biography of the dramatist; secondly, the very remarkable resemblance, not only in thought but in language, between certain passages in the *Fameuse Comédienne* and the *Misanthrope*, in which play Molière is generally believed to have, in some measure, taken his audience into his confidence in regard to his domestic affairs. Thus—to cite only one instance of several which Mr. Markheim gives—in the book Molière says: "*Je n'ai plus d'yeux pour ses défauts, il m'en reste seulement pour ce qu'elle a d'aimable;*" while in the play *Alceste* makes the same confession in almost the same words:—

"J'ai beau voir ses défauts, et j'ai beau l'en blâmer,  
En dépit qu'on en ait, elle se fait aimer."

Mr. Markheim's first argument may, we think, be dismissed, as the conversation in Grimarest would appear to be nothing more than a not too skilful imitation of

<sup>1</sup> *Études sur la vie et les œuvres de Molière.*

that in the *Fameuse Comédienne*; but the second is deserving of more attention. The similarity between the several passages Mr. Markheim cites is certainly too striking to be explained away on the ground of mere coincidence; yet, so far from proving his contention, it makes, in our opinion, for a diametrically opposite conclusion. Let us listen to what M. Larroumet, the best-informed and most impartial of all the recent biographers of Molière, has to say upon the matter: "If we admit that the *Fameuse Comédienne*, in spite of its detestable inspiration, is not the work of a beginner, but of an actress endowed with the talent of a natural style, the simplest course would be to admit further that this fragment is as much her work as the rest of the book. Trained to the practice of the theatre, she combines certain portions of her story with as many little plays. Here she will have perceived the scene to construct and the pathetic tirade to write. Is not the situation one to inspire and stimulate? Sustained then by her recollections of the *Misanthrope*, her imagination stirred by the passionate complaints of Alceste, her hatred of Armande coming to her assistance, she has been successful in the scene and the tirade."<sup>1</sup>

In a word, the whole Auteuil episode is pure fiction; yet fiction of such a kind—"one of the choicest morsels of French prose in its most glorious epoch"—as may well arouse a regret that the writer did not turn her undoubted talents to some worthier purpose than the composition of scandalous libels.

In the isolation in which he now found himself, Molière, who was one of those who cannot live without

<sup>1</sup> *La Comédie de Molière*, p. 158.

woman's affection, turned for comfort to Mlle. de Brie, his former providence, who, it may be mentioned, had in the *Misanthrope* played the part of Éliante, the lady who endeavours to console Alceste for the caprices of Célimène. Her intervention, however, was of a less irreproachable kind than Éliante's, and she appears to have passed a considerable portion of her time at Auteuil. The poet's friends remonstrated, pointing out that, by renewing his intimacy with Mlle. de Brie, he was giving his wife but too much excuse for her own conduct, and endeavoured to persuade him to break with her. "Is it for virtue, beauty, or intelligence that you love this woman?" one of them is said to have asked him. "You know that Florimont and Le Barre are her lovers, that she is not beautiful, that she is a perfect skeleton, and that she has no common sense." "I know all that," replied Molière; "but I am accustomed to her faults; for me to accommodate myself to the imperfections of another would be a task beyond my powers; I have neither the time nor the patience."

But Molière adored his wife: about this all his contemporaries are agreed. Bold and courageous in his works, ever ready to castigate vice and ridicule folly, without troubling himself about the possibility of reprisals, he showed himself in regard to her feeble and irresolute to the last degree. His relations with Mlle. de Brie and other women were after all but passing caprices; his passion for Armande was the one serious love of his life; a love which survived indifference, ingratitude, it may be even infidelity, and to which he always returned, in spite of vows and good resolutions.

Under these circumstances, a reconciliation could be only a matter of time, and, thanks to the good offices

of their common friends, Chapelle and the Marquis de Jonzac, it took place towards the end of the year 1671. The author of the *Fameuse Comédienne* is discreetly silent about this, fearing that it might weaken her indictment; and, between whiles, places a new intrigue of Armande; this time with a member of her husband's troupe.

Some years before, Molière had rescued a little boy named Michel Baron from the hands of some strolling players, and, perceiving in him the makings of an excellent actor, had attached him to himself and trained him for the stage. His confidence was justified, for Baron became in later years the greatest actor of his time and also a successful dramatist. Armande, however, was far from sharing Molière's liking for the boy; she detested him for his precocity and impertinent airs, and still more for the influence which she suspected him of exercising over her husband; and one day, during a rehearsal of *Mélicerte*, in which Baron had been cast for the title-part, carried her resentment to the point of dealing him a sound box on the ear. In high dudgeon, Baron forthwith took himself off and joined a strolling company; nor was it until four years later that, at the urgent entreaty of Molière, he consented to return. He was then a tall lad of seventeen, exceedingly handsome, full of assurance, and "already in great request among the ladies of the theatre and also among certain ladies of the fashionable world." It did not appear at first, says the author of the *Fameuse Comédienne*, that time had greatly modified the hostility with which Mlle. Molière and he regarded one another. But when they appeared together in *Psyché*, at the carnival of 1671, Armande in the title-part, Baron as Love, there came a change. "The common praises that they received compelled them

to examine one another more attentively, and even with some degree of pleasure. He was the first to break the silence by complimenting her on the good fortune that had befallen him in being chosen to represent her lover, and observing that he owed the approbation of the public to this happy chance, and that it was not difficult to play the part of a person whose feelings one could so well understand. The Molière replied that the praises bestowed on a man like himself were the reward of merit, and that she had no share in them; but that gallantry on the part of one who was said to have so many mistresses did not surprise her, and that he must be as accomplished an actor outside the theatre as he was on the stage.

“Baron, to whom these kind of reproaches were not displeasing, told her that he had indeed some habits that one might call *bonnes fortunes*, but that he was prepared to sacrifice all for her, and that he would set more value on the smallest of her favours than on any which the ladies who had smiled upon him were able to bestow. And he mentioned their names, with a discretion which was natural to him.”

Armande is, of course, enchanted by this proof of devotion, and, to cut a long story short, they resolve to continue their respective rôles off the stage.

We have related this supposed intrigue at far greater length than it deserves, since it furnishes a fair sample of the materials upon which M. Loiseleur and other historians have based their judgments of Armande. But, in point of fact, it is no more worthy of belief than the stories about Lauzun, Guiche, and the Abbé de Richelieu. Although the insufferable coxcomb whom La Bruyère has depicted under the name of Roscius, and

who is said to have depicted himself in his comedy, *L'Homme à bonnes fortunes*, was not the kind of person to be deterred by any honourable scruples from making love to the wife of his benefactor, had he been so minded, we can hardly suppose that an intrigue between Armande and a member of his own troupe could have been carried on without Molière becoming aware of it, or that, when aware of it, he would have permitted Baron to retain his place in the company. Moreover, apart from the statement in the *Fameuse Comédienne*, there is no reason to believe that the old antipathy between Armande and Baron ever ceased to exist, far less that they became lovers. What is certain, is that no sooner was Molière dead than Baron quitted the Palais-Royal and went over to the Hôtel de Bourgogne, at a moment when Armande, become chief of the troupe, was urgently in need of his services. This, it must be admitted, was hardly the conduct of a friend, to say nothing of a lover.

By the side of these intrigues, apocryphal or doubtful, it is pleasant to be able to record a friendship of an altogether unexceptional nature. The great Corneille, in spite of his affection for his wife, Marie de Lemperière, whose hand Cardinal de Richelieu is said to have obtained for him, after her father had sent the poet about his business, was of a very gallant disposition and in the habit of offering incense at the shrine of any goddess of the theatre who was inclined to accept his devotion. At Rouen, in 1758, he had, like Molière at an earlier date, fallen desperately in love with Mlle. du Parc, but had fared no better at the hands of that haughty beauty than the chief of the Illustre Théâtre. This rebuff, which drew from the chagrined poet the well-known *Stances à*

*une marquise*, seems to have brought home to Corneille the fact that he was no longer young, and to have somewhat damped his amorous ardour. At any rate, when Armande appeared upon the scene, he contented himself with offering her a platonic admiration, charmingly expressed in the third act of *Psyché*.

*Psyché*.—"Can one be jealous of the affection of relatives?"

*Amour*.—"I am so, my *Psyché*; I am so of all nature. The sun's rays kiss you too often; your tresses suffer too many caresses from the wind. The moment it toys with them, I murmur at it. The very air you breathe with too much pleasure passes between your lips. And, so soon as you sigh, I know not what affrights me, and makes me fear, among your sighs, some errant ones."

Not content with this tribute to the lady's charms, the old poet conceived the idea of writing for Armande a play in which she might impersonate the heroine, and he might portray himself in the character of a chivalrous old man in love with her. He, accordingly, composed his *Pulchérie*, which, as Molière, for some reason, could not see his way to accept it for the Palais-Royal, was produced at the Marais on November 2, 1672. It was a poor play, the dramatist having failed to endow either the plot with interest, or the characters, apart from the amorous old senator Martian, with any special individuality; and even Corneille's devoted admirer, Madame de Sévigné, was compelled to admit that "*Pulchérie* was not a success." Nevertheless the terms in which Martian speaks of the heroine were so very flattering that Armande must have regretted that circumstances had prevented her undertaking the latter part.

The reconciliation between Molière and Armande was in all likelihood facilitated by a serious illness with which the latter was seized in the early autumn of 1671, during the run of *Psyché*. Under such circumstances the most legitimate grievances are apt to be forgotten, and it must have needed but very little persuasion on the part of their common friends to induce Molière, with all his love for his wife revived at the sight of her suffering, to hasten her convalescence by an assurance of his full forgiveness. In the following February, Madeleine Béjart died, leaving the bulk of her property to Armande, and, towards the middle of that year, Molière removed from the Place du Palais-Royal, where he had lived for so long with the Béjarts and Mlle. de Brie, to a large house in the Rue de Richelieu, near the Académie des Peintres, which he furnished very sumptuously. Here, on September 15, Armande gave birth to her third child—a son—baptized as Pierre Jean Baptiste Armand on October 1, Boileau-Puimorin, brother of Boileau-Despréaux, and Mlle. Mignard, daughter of the celebrated painter, acting as sponsors. The little boy, however, only survived this ceremony a few days, thus preceding his illustrious father to the grave by rather less than four months.

The reconciliation with his wife, indeed, in itself so happy, was destined to prove fatal to Molière, and was undoubtedly one of the causes of his premature death. For some years, the poet had suffered from a chest affection, very possibly due to frequent exposure during his provincial tours. In the winter of 1665-1666, we learn from Robinet that he had had an illness which all but terminated fatally, and in the spring of 1667 he was again "*tout proche d'entrer dans la bière*," was absent



from the theatre for two months, and was compelled to restrict himself to a milk diet, and speak as little as possible when not on the stage. The retired life he had led during his breach with Armande had, of course, favoured the adoption of this regimen, and under it his health had so much improved that, believing himself cured, and unwilling to impose on his wife the cheerless society of a valetudinarian, he abandoned his abstemious habits, entertained largely, and, in short, resumed his former mode of life. The result was a rapid aggravation of his complaint; his nights were sleepless, he was racked by a terrible cough, and, at the beginning of the year 1673, it became evident that his days were numbered. In this condition, by the irony of Fate, it fell to him to represent the folly of a man in perfect health who, imagining himself the victim of all manner of fell diseases, is ready to submit to any and every remedy that may be suggested to him,—that is to say, the exact counterpart of his own state. On February 10, the *Malade imaginaire*, a happy conception in the composition of which the author had doubtless contrived to find some relief from his sufferings, both of body and mind—for there is some reason to believe that his relations with his wife were again becoming strained—was produced at the Palais-Royal, and played for three nights to crowded houses. On the morning of the fourth performance, February 17,<sup>1</sup> Molière was so weak

<sup>1</sup> Molière's troupe only played three times a week, on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Fridays; on the other days, the theatre was occupied by the Italian comedians. Friday was the favourite day for the production of new plays. The playhouses were also frequently closed: during Holy Week and the week following Easter, during the illness of a member of the Royal Family, on public fête days, and also, occasionally, when any particularly notorious criminal was to be executed

that Armande and Baron united in urging him not to play, but their efforts were unavailing. "How," he asked, "can I refuse to appear when so many persons' bread depends upon it? I should reproach myself for the distress I might cause them, as I have sufficient strength to prevent it." This speech is often quoted as a proof of Molière's consideration for others, but though the great writer's unselfishness and generosity are happily beyond dispute, it would appear more probable that his plea was merely an excuse for disregarding the advice of his wife and friend, as he was sufficiently well off to have been able to compensate those who would have suffered by the temporary closing of the theatre without any very serious inconvenience.<sup>1</sup> No; Molière knew that his end was near, and, like the brave man he was, he preferred to die in harness, rather than, by taking to his bed, prolong his sufferings a few days longer.

Accordingly, when the play began at four o'clock, he again appeared in the high-backed arm-chair of the imaginary invalid, and acted the part with as much whimsical humour as on the three previous occasions, though it was obvious to those on the stage that every speech and movement cost him a terrible effort; and in the burlesque ceremony where Argan takes the oath

in the Place de Grève. Thus, there were no performances on July 17, 1676, the day on which Madame de Brinvilliers, the poisoner, paid the penalty of her crimes. The play began at four o'clock and was always over before seven. Early in the century, the curtain, in winter, seems to have risen at two o'clock, in order to allow of the audience reaching their homes before the footpads were abroad.

<sup>1</sup> Grimarest places Molière's income as high as 30,000 livres, a sum, according to M. Larroumet's computation, equal to 150,000 francs to-day.

as a new doctor, swearing to adhere to the remedies prescribed by antiquity and to ignore modern discovery, he was seized with a convulsion, which he endeavoured vainly to disguise by forcing a laugh. When the curtain fell, he made his way to Baron's dressing-room and complained that he was "perishing of cold." A chair was obtained, and the dying man conveyed to his home, where he was put to bed. Feeling that his last hour was at hand, he asked for the consolations of religion, and Armande and Baron hurried off to Saint-Eustache, where, however, the two priests in attendance, learning who it was who required their help, declined to leave the church. The next priest applied to had a better sense of his duty, and consented to administer the Sacraments. But, in the meanwhile, much precious time had been wasted, and when he reached the house, Molière had no further need of his services. He had died at ten o'clock, in the arms of two Sisters of Charity, to whom he had long given shelter during their Lenten visits to Paris, and who had but that day arrived in the capital.

Notwithstanding the assistance of these two nuns, and the fact that a priest had been summoned to his death-bed, Molière was none the less regarded as having died without the consolations of religion, and M. Merlin, the curé of Saint-Eustache, refused ecclesiastical burial to his remains.

Armande at once addressed a petition to the Archbishop of Paris, Harlay de Chanvalon, explaining the circumstances of the case, and laying stress upon the fact of her husband having communicated at the previous Easter. It has been stated that the archbishop's reply was an absolute refusal. This is incorrect; he confined

himself to referring the petition to an official whose duty it was to inquire into such matters.

However, Armande, dreading an unfavourable answer, determined to seek the intervention of the King, and, accompanied by the curé of Auteuil, a liberal-minded ecclesiastic and a personal friend of Molière, she set off for Saint-Germain, where the Court then was. Even her enemies are compelled to admit that, in these trying circumstances, she showed both dignity and courage. "If," she exclaimed, when the King demurred to granting her request, "if my husband was a criminal, his crimes were authorised by your Majesty in person." This was certainly true, though to remind his Majesty of the fact was hardly calculated to further her cause, nor did the curé of Auteuil improve matters by embarking on a theological argument, apparently with the view of anticipating an attack upon his orthodoxy by his more bigoted brethren. Nevertheless, Louis XIV., though obviously much annoyed at such outspokenness, behaved with that tact which is one of his best claims to our respect. He dismissed the widow and the curé, telling them that the matter was one which concerned the archbishop and not himself; but, at the same time, he wrote to the prelate, bidding him "take steps to avoid *éclat* and scandal."

The archbishop, as became a good courtier, bowed to the royal commands, but, in order to save appearances, compromised the matter. He permitted "the curé of Saint-Eustache to give ecclesiastical burial to the body of the deceased in the cemetery of the parish, on condition, nevertheless, that it should take place without any ostentation, with two priests only, and after dusk had fallen; that there should be no solemn service on his behalf, either in the said parish of Saint-Eustache or even

in any church of the regular clergy, and that our present permission shall be without prejudice to the rules of the ritual of our Church, which we desire shall be observed according to their form and tenor.”<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written on the refusal of the curé of Saint-Eustache to accord Molière Christian burial, and on the conditions imposed by the Archbishop of Paris after the official intervention of the king; and the bigotry and inhumanity of both priest and prelate have been denounced in scathing terms. But the majority of those who have treated of the incident were better acquainted with the theatre than the Sorbonne, for, though the souvenirs of *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan* no doubt counted for much in the matter, Harlay de Chanvalon and his subordinate were, after all, only putting into force a rule of the Church which had existed for centuries, though in recent times it had, happily, been more honoured in the breach than the observance. As, however, the question is of great interest, and one, also, to which we shall have occasion to return more than once in the course of the present volume, it may be as well for us to give here a brief sketch of the doctrine of the Church in regard to the actor.

The hostility of the Christian Church to the theatre may be traced back to very early times. The Fathers of the Church—Tertullian, Saint-Cyprian, Saint-Chrysostome, and others—had been unsparing in their condemnation of the actor,<sup>2</sup> whilst Saint-Salvien, a priest of the

<sup>1</sup> Cited by M. Gaston Maugras, *Les Comédiens hors la loi*, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Under the term actor, the early Fathers seem to have included not only actors in the modern acceptation of the word, but mimes, jugglers, acrobats, gladiators, chariot-drivers, and, in fact, almost all public performers.

fourth century, went so far as to declare that "comedy was worse than blasphemy, theft, homicide, and all other crimes, and that the spectator was the accomplice of the performer." Nor was this hostility by any means confined to treatises and sermons. The Council of Elvira, in 305, enacted that no actor was to be received into the Church unless he had solemnly engaged to renounce his profession; if he failed to keep his promise, he was to be immediately excommunicated. At the Council of Arles, held five years later, all circus-performers and actors were excluded from the Sacraments, so long as they exercised their profession; and the third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) denied them baptism or absolution. Henceforth, the Church regarded actors as beyond her pale, and, imitating the severity of the Roman Law, placed them on the same footing as prostitutes. She refused them baptism; she refused them absolution; she refused to marry them; she refused to accept them as sponsors at the baptism of the children of their relatives and friends; she refused them the Holy Communion, in public or in private, in life or on their deathbeds; finally, she refused them even Christian burial.

Extravagantly severe as all these canons may, at first sight, appear, they were none the less perfectly logical. It was indeed only natural that the early Church should insist that actors who desired to participate in her Sacraments should forthwith abjure their profession, when we pause to consider the exceedingly licentious character of the Roman theatre and the powerful influence it exercised in perpetuating the memory of Paganism. It is to be remarked, however, that the censures pronounced against the actor emanated not from any Pope or ecumenical council, but from provincial synods, and

when, in process of time, Paganism disappeared and practically the whole of civilised Europe became Christian, they naturally ceased to be enforced—though they were never formally abrogated—in every country, save one. The exception was France, where the old anathemas remained in force, as a natural consequence of the independent attitude adopted by the French clergy towards the Holy See.

In order to protect themselves against the encroachments of the Popes, and to resist the changes which they were incessantly striving to introduce into the discipline of the Church, the French bishops laid the foundations of Gallicanism, by declaring immutable all the canons promulgated by the early councils up to the eighth century which had passed into the customs of the Church of France. The adoption of these canons was a very serious matter for the theatrical profession in France, for among them was that of the Council of Arles, already mentioned, which expressly excluded the actor from the Sacraments, so long as he followed his calling. However, it was clearly understood that the penalties pronounced should not be applied to the regular actor, but only to mountebanks and other persons whose performances might serve to recall those of Paganism; and indeed down to the time of the Reformation, when the Catholic clergy, unwilling to show less austerity than those of the Reformed faith, began to proscribe severely all kinds of amusements, even these seem to have been treated with great indulgence.<sup>1</sup>

In 1624, the bigoted Jean de Gondy, Archbishop of Paris, declared in a pastoral letter that actors ought to be deprived of the Sacraments and ecclesiastical burial,

<sup>1</sup> M. Gaston Maugras, *Les Comédiens hors la loi*, passim.

and stigmatized their profession as "infamous and one unworthy of a Christian." Nevertheless, until the latter part of the seventeenth century, thanks in a great measure, no doubt, to the patronage bestowed on the stage by Richelieu and Mazarin, in practice the greatest tolerance prevailed, and the clergy accorded to the actor the same treatment as to all other good Catholics. Thus, on January 6, 1654, we find Molière appearing as godfather at a church at Montpellier, and, in 1670 and again in 1672, discharging the same duty at churches in Paris, while his marriage, in February 1662, at Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, was celebrated without the least difficulty being raised.

Strange as it may appear, it was the protection accorded the theatre, and the extreme indulgence shown to all connected with it, by a great party in the Church itself that was directly responsible for the termination of this happy state of affairs and the violent reaction, of which the conduct of Harlay de Chanvalon and the curé of Saint-Eustache towards Molière was but the beginning.

For some time, the Jesuits seem to have regarded the theatre with disfavour; but towards the middle of the seventeenth century, perceiving that it might very readily be made to serve as a vehicle for the propagation of their own ideas, their attitude changed, and they not only permitted all who came under their influence to attend the play, but even encouraged the pupils in their colleges to perform theological comedies, in which their enemies, the Jansenists, were held up to ridicule. This, naturally, had the effect of exasperating the zealots of Port-Royal and their numerous adherents, who, always hostile to the drama, quickly became bitterly antagonistic and



required but very slight provocation to declare open war.

This provocation was not long in coming. In 1665, the clever but eccentric playwright Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, the author of *Les Visionnaires*, having passed "*à la devotion la plus outrée*," espoused the cause of the Jesuits, and, believing that he had received a call from Heaven to combat the heretics—that is to say, the Jansenists—made a violent attack upon them. The Jansenists replied by the pen of their famous publicist, Nicole, who stigmatized those who wrote for the theatre as "public poisoners, not of bodies, but of souls." Racine, believing his honour touched, joined in the fray and ridiculed the bigotry of Port-Royal. Nicole rejoined with a *Traité de la Comédie*, wherein, relying on the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, he condemned not only dramatic authors, but those who interpreted them. "The play-house," said he, "is a school of Vice. The profession of an actor is an employment unworthy of a Christian," and much more to the same effect. Armand de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, formerly a generous patron of the drama and of Molière, but now, for some time past, a Jansenist of the most advanced type, published a similar work, and gave it as his opinion that a troupe of actors was "a troupe of devils," and to amuse oneself at the play was to "delight the demon." So the war went on.

The attacks of Nicole and the Prince de Conti were not without their effect; they aroused the zeal of all who disliked the theatre and believed it prejudicial to morality; and a regular campaign was organised. All unconsciously, Molière himself forged a terrible weapon for the enemies of his profession. The produc-

tion of *Tartuffe* aroused a perfect storm of indignation among all sections of the clergy; Jesuit and Jansenist united in denouncing the play, its author, and his calling. A curé of Paris, one Père Roullé, demanded that the writer, "this demon clothed with flesh and habited as a man, the most notorious blasphemer and libertine that has appeared for centuries past, should be delivered to the flames, the forerunners of those of hell;" Bourdaloue preached against it; Bossuet declared the works of the poet to be a tissue of buffooneries, blasphemies, infamies, and obscenities; and Hardouin de Péréfixe, the then Archbishop of Paris, issued an order forbidding people "to represent, read or hear *Tartuffe* recited under pain of excommunication."

All the old prejudices of the Church against the theatre awoke with redoubled force. All the old anathemas against the hapless actor, which had been allowed to slumber for centuries, were dug up by industrious theologians, and the clergy waited eagerly for opportunities of applying them. In 1671, Floridor, the famous tragedian of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, fell dangerously ill and sent for the curé of Saint-Eustache to give him absolution. The curé flatly refused, save on condition that the actor would engage, in the event of his recovery, never again to set foot on the stage. Floridor gave the required promise; nevertheless, when he died, he was buried without ecclesiastical rites. Molière himself, as we have just seen, was the next victim of priestly intolerance.

The funeral took place on February 21, at nine o'clock in the evening, in conformity with the orders of Chanvalon. By that hour, an immense crowd had

gathered in front of the house, drawn thither, no doubt, merely by curiosity. Armande, however, "unable to penetrate its intention," became much alarmed, fearing that the enemies of her husband were organising a riot, and that some indignity to his remains was intended. She accordingly determined to endeavour to appease it, and going to a window, threw out handfuls of silver to the amount of one thousand livres, "at the same time, imploring the assembled people to give their prayers to her husband, in terms so touching that there was not one among those persons who did not pray to God with all his heart."

The body of Molière was not taken into the church, but conveyed direct to the cemetery of Saint-Joseph; the coffin, covered by a large pall, being preceded by two priests and six *enfants bleus* carrying lighted tapers in silver sconces, and followed by a considerable number of people, many of whom bore torches. Among the mourners were Boileau, La Fontaine, Chapelle, and the players of the Palais-Royal.

When the cortège reached the cemetery, which was situated in the Rue Montmartre, a long delay occurred, as the gate was closed and the keys had been forgotten. While awaiting their arrival, the mourners were able to read, by the light of the blazing torches, a placard posted on the wall, which bore the following verses:—

"Il est passé ce Molière  
Du Théâtre à la bière;  
Le pauvre homme a fait un faux bond;  
Et ce tant renommé bouffon  
N'a jamais su si bien faire  
Le *Malade imaginaire*  
Qu'il a fait la mort pour tout de bon."

At last, the keys arrived, and the ceremony was concluded without further incident. Molière was interred in the middle of the cemetery, at the foot of the cross. Not a word was spoken over his grave.<sup>1</sup>

Above the last resting-place of her husband Armande placed a large tombstone, which was still to be seen in 1745, when the brothers Parfaict published their *Histoire du Théâtre Français*. "This stone," writes Titon du Tillet, "is cracked down the middle, which was occasioned by a very noble and very remarkable action on the part of his widow. Two or three years after Molière's death, there was a very severe winter, and she ordered to be conveyed to the cemetery a hundred loads of wood, which were burned on her husband's tomb, to warm all the poor of the quarter; the great heat of the fire caused this stone to crack in two."

It is, as we have said elsewhere, an exceedingly difficult task to arrive at a definite conclusion in regard to the conduct of Armande. That she was the abandoned woman that the *Fameuse Comédienne* and the writers who follow it have depicted her we entirely decline to believe. If she had been, is it conceivable that Molière would have lived with her so long, or that, once having broken with her, he would ever have been brought to consent to a reconciliation? On the other hand, to pretend that she was an irreproachable wife seems as hazardous as to affirm her misconduct. There is no smoke without fire, and the separation between her and her husband—a separation lasting for five years—is a highly suspicious circumstance. Its immediate cause may, of course, have been merely incompatibility of

<sup>1</sup> M. Gaston Maugras, *Les Comédiens hors la loi*, p. 124.

temper—for the account of the matter given by the *Fameuse Comédienne* is utterly unreliable—but, at the same time, it may very well have been occasioned by a far graver reason. On the whole, the wisest course would appear to be to adopt a middle position, and, while refusing to accept the statements of her detractors, to be equally diffident about associating ourselves with the somewhat violent reaction in the lady's favour which has set in within recent years.

Whatever may have been Armande's sins or shortcomings, however, we should, in justice to her, remember that the responsibility for Molière's unhappiness did not rest entirely with her. If she was selfish, vain, and frivolous, greedy for pleasure, and impatient of contradiction, Molière possessed the nervousness and irritability so frequently associated with genius in a very marked degree, and which, in his case, were aggravated by ill-health and overwork. The servant of a public ever exacting and eager for novelties, the strain to which he was subjected, always very great, must, at times, have been well-nigh unbearable; for we must remember that he was not only a dramatist, but an actor, not only an actor, but a manager. The financial affairs of the troupe, it is true, were in the capable hands of La Grange; but Molière made himself responsible for its efficiency, and though the *Impromptu de Versailles* no doubt conveys an exaggerated idea of his difficulties in this direction, they were probably considerable. The jealousy between the two principal actresses, Armande and Mlle. de Brie, must have been alone a fruitful source of trouble. In these circumstances, it is not difficult to understand that the little trials of domestic life, which in the majority of men arouse but a passing

feeling of annoyance, should have presented themselves to him as intolerable vexations, and that the sudden gusts of passion in which, we are told, he was wont to indulge on the most trifling provocation, should have widened the breach between himself and Armande, whose narrow mind was incapable of comprehending that in such outbursts men of her husband's temperament oft-times seek relief for long weeks of mental strain and anxiety. Add to all this the fact that Molière was of an excessively jealous disposition, and it becomes obvious that the marriage was doomed to failure from the very first; in fact, the only thing to occasion surprise is that the inevitable rupture did not take place at a much earlier date, and that it was ever healed.

Molière, as we have seen, had been buried on February 21, and three days later the theatre of the Palais-Royal reopened with a performance of the *Misanthrope*, Armande playing Célimène. Her conduct in thus resuming her place in the company so soon after her husband's death was commented upon very unfavourably;<sup>1</sup> but it would appear to have been dictated by stern necessity. In the face of the formidable competition of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the troupe of Molière, already terribly weakened by the death of its chief, could not possibly have afforded to lose its leading actress for even a brief period; and Armande, therefore,

<sup>1</sup> "It is true that the loss of Molière is irreparable," writes the Comte de Limoges to Bussy-Rabutin on March 3, 1673. "I believe that no one will be less affected than his wife; she acted in comedy yesterday." And Bussy answers: "So far as I can see, her mourning will not cost her much."

decided to sacrifice her own feelings to the interests of her colleagues.

Indeed, as matters stood, the continued existence of the "Comédiens du Roi" as a separate company was soon in imminent peril. During the Easter recess, the Hôtel de Bourgogne intrigued vigorously against them, with the result that four of the best players, with Baron at their head, resigned their places and passed over to the older theatre; while, shortly afterwards, Lulli obtained the king's permission to make the theatre of the Palais-Royal the home of French opera, and the unfortunate *Moliéristes* found themselves without a stage to act upon. This was a crushing blow; and when, very reluctantly, the troupe had made overtures to their old rivals in the Rue Mauconseil, with a view to an amalgamation, and had been met by a curt refusal, the position seemed almost desperate.

Well indeed was it for Armande and her colleagues that they numbered among them, in the person of La Grange, one of the shrewdest and most capable men of business who ever trod the boards of a theatre. Born, about 1640, at Amiens, of respectable Picard stock, La Grange, after two or three years' experience in the provinces as a strolling player, joined his fortunes to those of Molière; and, in May 1659, on the death of Joseph Béjart, stepped into his shoes as the *jeune premier* of the troupe. As an actor, he appears to have been altogether admirable, the type of the perfect lover, as understood in those days, and, according to the anonymous author of the *Entretiens galants*, to see him play with Armande in such a piece as the *Malade imaginaire* was a sight not easily forgotten: "Their acting continues still, even when their part is concluded;

they are never useless on the stage; they play almost as well when they listen as when they speak. Their glances are never wasted; their eyes do not wander round the boxes; they know that the theatre is full, but they speak and act as if they see only those who are concerned in their rôle and action."

But, excellent actor as was La Grange, he was even better as an "orator"<sup>1</sup> and manager, posts which, at the time of Molière's death, he had occupied for some six years; and there can be no doubt that much of the success which had attended the troupe was due to his skill in gauging the public taste, his untiring energy, and his personal popularity. To him, too, we owe that wonderful *Registre*, a perfect mine of accurate and detailed information about the doings of Molière's troupe, the Hôtel Guénégaud, and the early years of the Comédie-Française; while it was under his auspices that the first complete edition of his old chief's works was given to the world.

On the advice of La Grange, Armande now resolved

<sup>1</sup> It was the "orator's" duty to come before the curtain to make announcements or crave the indulgence of the audience in a neat little speech, flowered with compliments and sparkling with witty allusions. It was a very important post and was always filled by an actor of distinction. Thus Bellerose and Floridor were the orators of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, Mondory of the Marais, while Molière was for some years his own bellman. La Grange, however, appears to have excelled them all. "Although," says Chappuzeau, "he is but of middle height, his presence is good, and his air easy and elegant. You are charmed before he opens his lips. As he has a great deal of fire and of the decent boldness an orator should have, it is a pleasure to listen to him when he comes on to speak the compliment. That one with which he regaled his audience at the opening of the theatre of the Troupe du Roi (Hotel Guénégaud) was in the best imaginable taste. What he had excellently contrived he spoke with marvellous grace."



on a bold stroke. Some years before, a play-loving nobleman, the Marquis de Sourdéac, had built a theatre in a tennis-court in the Rue Mazarine, near the Luxembourg, where opera had been performed, until, in March 1672, the intriguing Lulli had succeeded in securing for himself the exclusive right of representing musical pieces. It was a fine house, fitted up with every convenience, "with a stage," says Samuel Chappuzeau, in his work on the Paris theatres of the time, "large enough to allow the most elaborate machinery to be worked." La Grange proposed that the troupe should acquire this theatre, and himself undertook the negotiations, which resulted in the Marquis de Sourdéac and his partner, a M. de Champeron, ceding to Armande their lease of the property for the sum of 30,000 livres, of which 14,000 was to be paid in cash and the balance by fifty livres on each performance given there.

An event of great importance was the immediate outcome of the acquisition of this theatre. For some years past, the popularity of the Théâtre du Marais had been steadily declining, a circumstance which seems to have been attributable rather to the mediocrity of the plays produced there and the fact that the district in which it was situated was no longer the centre of Parisian life, as it had been during the first half of the century, than to any lack of talent on the part of the company, which, indeed, comprised several excellent performers of both sexes; and the establishment of the Opera threatened to reduce its already diminished receipts still further. Accordingly, Louis XIV. decided that it should join forces with Mlle. Molière's troupe, and, on June 23, 1673, an ordinance issued by Colbert closed the old playhouse in the Rue Vieille-du-

Temple, which had survived the theatrical vicissitudes of nearly eighty years, and granted permission to the two united companies henceforth to be known as the "*Troupe du Roi*," to perform comedies and other *divertissements honnêtes* in the Rue Mazarine.

The new theatre, which was usually called the Théâtre Guénégaud, the street of that name being close at hand, opened its doors on July 9 with a performance of *Tartuffe*. At first, it met with but indifferent success, and between that date and Easter 1674, the share of each player only amounted to 1481 livres, a striking contrast to the takings at the Palais-Royal during the last year of Molière's life; while, on one occasion, at the beginning of the second season, *l'Avare* was played to a house of 88 livres! However, matters steadily improved; by the following Easter the success of the company was assured, and the season of 1679-1680 was worth 1100 livres more to each of the old *Moliéristes* than the great and profitable year of *Tartuffe* itself.

Although the perennial comedies of Molière naturally figured frequently in the bills, Armande and La Grange had a keen eye for novelties, and did not disdain to tickle the public with melodramas and spectacular plays; and it was from these indeed that the theatre derived the greater part of its revenue. Thus *Circé*, a tragedy by Thomas Corneille, with changes of scenery, and music by Charpentier, brought in 24,000 livres in nine performances; while the *Devineress*, a comic-melodrama, by the same playwright and Donneau de Visé, on the adventures of La Voisin, the poisoner, was played for forty-seven consecutive nights, almost a record for those days. Another success was achieved when Thomas Corneille turned Molière's *Don Juan* into verse, "eliminating

the speeches which offended the scrupulous." Donneau de Visé, to whose "puffing" in the *Mercure* the Théâtre Guénégaud was probably indebted for not a little of its popularity, declared that in the process of transition the play "had acquired new beauties without losing any of the old," and though few will be found to agree with this pronouncement, the new version proved exceedingly popular.

The first of the above-mentioned plays, in which Armande secured a great personal triumph in the part of the beautiful sorceress, was associated with a singular incident.

One evening, a well-dressed man, who occupied a seat upon the stage, approached the actress, as she was standing in the wings awaiting her turn to go on, and addressed her in the manner of an ardent and favoured lover. "Never," said he, "have I seen you look so beautiful. Were it not that I am already your slave, I should be so from this moment."

Armande, who had never seen the gentleman before, turned haughtily away, without making any reply. But when the play was over, the stranger followed her to her dressing-room, and, having reproached her with her previous coldness, inquired why she had not kept an appointment which she had given him that afternoon. The lady, in profound astonishment, disclaimed all knowledge of her visitor, and angrily ordered him to leave the room. The stranger refused, insisting that she had given him "a score of rendezvous," and demanding how she could have the audacity to treat him thus after such an intimacy as had existed between them. Armande thereupon sent her maid to summon some of her colleagues, who arrived to find their leader and the

stranger almost beside themselves with passion. As well as her outraged feelings would permit, the actress explained the situation to her friends, declaring that she had never set eyes on the gentleman before her in her life; while he, on his side, asserted in the most positive manner that he knew her intimately, and that she had repeatedly met him at a house of somewhat questionable repute. "Why," cried he, "the very necklace she is now wearing is one of the presents I have made her!" and he snatched it from her. Armande immediately sent for the guards attached to the theatre, who seized the stranger and held him until the arrival of a commissary of police, when he was conducted to prison.

His statement to the authorities served but to deepen the mystery. It transpired that he was a M. Lescot, a president of the Parliament of Grenoble, who was on a visit to Paris. He had fallen in love with Armande after seeing her play at the Théâtre Guénégaud, but, lacking courage to declare his passion directly, and having failed to secure an introduction in the ordinary way, had had recourse to the good offices of a woman called Ledoux, "*dont le métier ordinaire était de faire plaisir au public*," and promised her a liberal reward, if she could arrange a rendezvous. In this she had been successful; Mlle. Molière had accepted his proposals, and they had met repeatedly at Ledoux's house. The actress had, however, strictly forbidden him, for prudential reasons, to address, or even approach, her at the theatre, which instructions he had faithfully observed until that evening, when, as she had failed to keep an appointment to meet him after dinner, he had determined to ascertain the reason, thinking that "a little display of passion" might not be altogether displeasing to her. As for the neck-

lace, which, it should be mentioned, was one of a common pattern, he had purchased it at a jeweller's shop on the Quai des Orfèvres, the lady being with him at the time. Let them question the jeweller, who would, no doubt, be prepared to corroborate his statement.

Matters now began to look very unpleasant for Armande, and when the jeweller of the Quai des Orfèvres, without a moment's hesitation, identified her as the lady who had accompanied the president to his shop, and Ledoux was found to have left the city, she was in despair. However, a few days later the affair was cleared up. Hunted down by the police, Ledoux confessed that she had palmed off on the credulous Lescot a young woman called Tourelle, who bore so extraordinary a resemblance to Mlle. Molière, both in appearance and voice, that it was almost impossible for any one not personally acquainted with the latter to tell one from the other, and who had already succeeded in duping quite a number of persons. This woman was also arrested, and a decree of the Parliament of Paris, dated October 17, 1675, sentenced the two delinquents "to be flogged, naked, with rods, before the principal gate of the Châtelet and the house of Mlle. Molière," and to be afterwards banished from Paris for three years. Président Lescot was condemned to pay a fine of two hundred crowns, and to make "verbal reparation," that is to say, he had to declare in court, in the presence of Mlle. Molière and any four persons whom she might select, that he had "raised his hand against her and used the insulting language mentioned in the indictment through error and inadvertence." Which done, we may presume, he lost no time in returning to Grenoble, a sadder and a wiser man.

"One is struck," observes M. Larroumet, "by the singular resemblance that this affair presents to that of the Diamond Necklace, which, in 1785, involved the name of Marie Antoinette in so resounding a scandal. After a lapse of a hundred years, the same rôles are resumed, that of Armande by the queen, that of the *entremetteuse* Ledoux by the Comtesse de la Motte, that of the woman Tourelle by the girl Oliva, finally, that of Président Lescot by the Cardinal de Rohan. And that nothing may be wanting to the parallel, just as the queen was bespattered by the infamous libel of Madame de la Motte, Armande had to submit to *La Fameuse Comédienne*.

Less than a year afterwards, Armande was the victim of another scandal, even more painful than the one recorded above. The scoundrelly Guichard, the attempted poisoner of Lulli, of whom we have already spoken, did not confine his attack upon the widow of Molière to repeating the hideous accusation of Montfleury: he calumniated her in the most shameful manner. "The Molière," he wrote, "is infamous both in law (*i.e.* by profession) and in deed. Previous to her marriage, she lived continually in wholesale prostitution; during her married life, continually in public adultery. In short, the Molière is the most infamous of all infamous women." The obvious extravagance of these charges, and the fact that Guichard assailed with equal violence the characters of most of the other witnesses for the prosecution, no doubt robbed them of much of their sting.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, they can hardly have failed to

<sup>1</sup> Guichard was convicted of the charge of attempted poisoning, declared "infamous," and sentenced to the *amende honorable* and to pay a heavy fine, while the printers of the memoir in which he had libelled

occasion the unfortunate woman great annoyance, and, following as they did so closely upon the *affaire* Lescot, had probably not a little influence upon a step which she took some months later.

In May 1677, Armande exchanged the glorious name of Molière for that of Guérin d'Estriché, one of her colleagues of the Théâtre Guénégaud, and, in earlier years, a member of the now defunct Théâtre du Marais. For this second marriage she was severely blamed by her contemporaries,<sup>1</sup> while it is the fashion among modern writers to refer to it as if it had been a species of sacrilege. In this, we are inclined to think, an injustice had been done Armande. Molière, as one of his recent biographers reminds us, was not, during the years which followed his death, regarded as the mighty genius which he is now admitted to have been. Save to a few, like Boileau, who fully comprehended the extent of the loss which literature had sustained, he was merely an amusing actor and an excellent author, whose premature death they deplored, but whom they never dreamed of apotheosizing.<sup>2</sup> As for Armande, she was still young and retained all her fascination; she had not been happy in her first marriage, and may very well have felt that life owed her some compensation. Besides, a second marriage would free her from the attentions of unwelcome admirers, of whom, we may be sure, the luckless Président Lescot was only one among many, and would provide

Armande and others were also punished. He appealed against the sentence, which, in the following year, was quashed, a result undoubtedly due to the fact that he had powerful protectors at Court.

<sup>1</sup> An epigram ran :—

“ Elle avoit un mari d'esprit, qu'elle aimoit peu,  
Elle en prend un de chair, qu'elle aime d'avantage.”

<sup>2</sup> M. Larroumet, *La Comédie de Molière*, p. 174.

her with a counsellor in business matters whose interests would be identical with her own, and of whom she must have long felt the need.

With Guérin, Armande appears to have lived very happily, and even the author of *La Fameuse Comédienne* is compelled to recognise that her conduct was exemplary, though she hastens to qualify this reluctant admission by declaring that her second husband was a veritable tyrant, who brooked no opposition to his will and did not hesitate to enforce obedience by blows. All disinterested witnesses, however, concur in representing Guérin as an excellent man, and we see no reason to believe that the anonymous author comes anywhere nearer the truth here than in other portions of her history.

At Easter 1679, Armande and La Grange succeeded in persuading the famous *tragédienne* Mlle. de Champmeslé, who had been for nineteen years the mainstay of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, to transfer her services to the Théâtre Guénégaud, Armande, with rare self-denial, ceding to the illustrious recruit the place which she herself had so long occupied. The defection of their great actress was a paralysing blow for the players of the Rue Mauconseil, and, coupled with the death of La Thorillière, which occurred shortly afterwards, rendered their position so precarious that, by a *lettre de cachet* dated October 21, 1680, Louis XIV. directed that they should join forces with the Théâtre Guénégaud; and the Comédie-Française was founded. Thus, of the three great troupes in existence at the time of Molière's death, his own alone survived, fortified by the ruin of their rivals.

Armande continued her career as an actress for some years longer, perhaps her most successful impersonation being that of a young Italian girl in a play called *Le*



*Parisien*, written by the husband of Mlle. de Champmeslé. At the Easter recess of 1694, she retired from the stage, with a pension of one thousand livres. From that time we hear but little of her. She appears to have lived a very quiet and uneventful life, for the most part, at a charming country-house which she owned at Meudon, and which still exists, very much as the actress left it.<sup>1</sup> She died at Paris, in the Rue du Touraine, on November 30, 1700, at the age of fifty-eight.

Of Armande's three children by Molière only one survived their father, a daughter, Madeleine, who, at the age of twenty, much to her mother's disgust, eloped with a M. de Montalant, a middle-aged widower with several children. Making a virtue of necessity, Madame Guérin gave her consent to her daughter's marriage, and Madeleine and her husband subsequently resided at Auteuil, where the former died in 1723. She left no children.

By Guérin, Armande had a son, to whom she seems to have been intensely devoted. In 1698, at the age of twenty, this young man published an edition of the *Mélicerte* of Molière, which he had rendered into verse, preceded by an introduction, in which he mentioned that in the Guérin household the memory of the dramatist was held "in respect and veneration."

Armande's death certificate naturally contained no mention of the great man whose name she had once borne and whose works she had both inspired and interpreted. Nevertheless, posterity has decided to ignore her connection with the worthy Guérin, and, for us, she must always remain the "Wife of Molière."

<sup>1</sup> No. 11 Rue des Pierres. See Arsène Houssaye's interesting account of a visit paid to it, in his beautifully illustrated work, *Molière: sa femme et sa fille* (Paris: Dentu, 1880), p. 129 *et seq.*



## II

MARIE DE CHAMPMESLÉ



## II

### MARIE DE CHAMPMESLÉ

“THE name of the Champmeslé is inseparable from both the immortality and the frailties of the life of Racine.”<sup>1</sup>

Marie Desmares, the actress of whom these words were written, was born at Rouen, the birthplace of the two Corneilles and other prominent figures in the dramatic history of the seventeenth century, in February 1642. Her father, Guillaume Desmares, though not, as several biographical dictionaries and works of reference state, the son of a President of the Parliament of Normandy, appears to have been a person of some social position, as his name is preceded by a *Monsieur*, a title which in those days was generally confined to the *noblesse* and professional classes, while her mother, Marie Marc, was also respectably connected, one of her brothers being an official of the Parliament.

Of Marie's childhood and youth we know scarcely anything. In 1653 she lost her father, very probably in an epidemic which broke out at Rouen that year; and, not long afterwards, her mother married again, her second husband being one Antoine La Guérault or Laguérault, a well-to-do landed proprietor in the neighbourhood. The girl and her brother Nicolas, who was also to achieve distinction on the boards, seem to have received a fair education; but, either because she

<sup>1</sup> Paul Foucher, *Les Coulisses du Passé*.

was unhappy in the home of her stepfather, or because she saw but little chance of the indispensable *dot* being forthcoming, at the age of twenty-three, Marie decided to tempt fortune on the stage.

At this period, there was no regular theatre at Rouen; indeed, buildings reserved exclusively for dramatic performances were hardly known outside the capital. There were, however, two large tennis-courts, one situated in the Rue des Charrettes, the other in the Rue Saint-Éloi, the proprietors of which were always ready, at a few hours' notice, to convert them into temples of Thespis for the accommodation of any travelling company which happened to be visiting the town. M. Noury, the lady's latest biographer, thinks that it was in the second of these, called the *Jeu de Paume des Braques*, where Molière's troupe had played in 1643, and again in 1658, that Marie Desmares made her *début*.

By Marie's side, a young actor from Paris, Charles Chevillet by name, made his bow to the public. This young man, who was a few months younger than his fair colleague, was the son of a worthy silk-merchant of the Rue Saint-Honoré.<sup>1</sup> Chevillet *père*, being of a practical turn of mind, had endeavoured to inspire his son with a taste for his own trade. But, as ill-luck would have it, the theatre of the Petit-Bourbon, where Molière's troupe was then established, was situated within easy distance of his shop, and, after attending the performances for some little time, Charles came

<sup>1</sup> And not of a *marchana des rubans*, of the Pont-au-Change, as so many writers state, so that the epigram of Le Noble:—

“Tu les as mesuré sans doute [tes vers] à l'aune antique  
Dont jadis ton papa mesurant ses rubans,”

loses its point.

to the conclusion that measuring and matching silks was altogether too prosaic a calling for him. Accordingly, one fine day he disappeared from Paris and made his way to Rouen, where, according to the custom of the time, in mounting the boards, he added to his own patronymic an aristocratic pseudonym, and became Charles Chevillet, Sieur de Champmeslé.

M. de Champmeslé, who is described as "a handsome man, with a distinguished air and extremely polished manners," "witty and possessed of all that is required to please and to command love," made a very favourable impression upon Mlle. Desmares. He, on his side, admired her greatly, and very possibly foresaw something of the great career which awaited her. They, therefore, determined to share each other's fortunes, and the young man, having paid a visit to Paris to obtain his parents' consent, they were married on January 9, 1666, at the church of Saint-Éloi, at Rouen.

In view of what we have already said about the practice of the Church in regard to the theatrical profession, it is not without interest to note that the *acte de mariage* states that the parties "practised the vocation of players," and that the banns had been published, "notwithstanding the fact that they had no intention of abandoning the exercise of their profession at lawful times."

The young couple continued playing in Rouen and the neighbourhood until the summer of 1668, when, alarmed, apparently by the plague, which was devastating Normandy, they removed to Paris. Here Champmeslé, who was by this time a very capable actor, was soon invited to join the company of the Théâtre du Marais; and, at the beginning of the following year, his wife was offered a place in the same troupe.

Mlle. de Champmésle made her first appearance on the Paris stage on February 15, 1669, in *La Fête de Vénus*, an insipid pastoral, by the Abbé Boyer, in which she impersonated the goddess and was much applauded. In the early months of 1670 she secured two other triumphs. The first was in an "heroic comedy," called *Polycrate*, also by Boyer; and it spoke volumes for the talent and charm of the young actress that the audience should have been content to sit through and applaud five acts of what appears to have been an almost worthless play. Her second success was gained in *Les Amours de Vénus et Adonis*, a tragedy by Donneau de Visé, in which she again represented the goddess, and Robinet chanted her praises:—

"La belle déesse Vénus,  
Et dans ce rôle cette actrice  
Est une parfaite enchantrice."

But Mlle. de Champmésle was but half satisfied with such successes. She was ambitious, and felt that at the Marais her talents had not sufficient scope. The old theatre, as we have said elsewhere, had now fallen on evil days; the pieces represented there seemed sorry stuff indeed in comparison with the comedies of Molière and the tragedies of Racine; it was the Palais-Royal and the Hôtel de Bourgogne which divided the suffrages of the playgoing public; the *salle* in the Rue Vieille-du-Temple was at times well-nigh deserted. She knew that her true vocation was in tragedy; not in tragedy such as the third-class dramatists who wrote for the Théâtre du Marais penned, but in plays like the *Cid* and *Polyeucte*, *Alexandre* and *Andromaque*. On first arriving in Paris, she had had the good sense to



recognise that her talents were as yet insufficiently developed to allow of her attempting the great rôles of Corneille and Racine; but now circumstances had changed. Her acting had had the good fortune to attract the attention of a member of the Marais troupe named Laroque, whose acquaintance she had made at Rouen. Laroque, as is not infrequently the case, though only a moderate performer, was an admirable instructor; and, perceiving in his young colleague great possibilities, had devoted much time and care to perfecting her in her art, and with the happiest results. Accordingly, at Easter 1770, Mlle. Champmeslé and her husband quitted the Rue Vieille-du-Temple for the Hôtel de Bourgogne. "Here she met Racine and glory."

The Hôtel de Bourgogne reopened after the Easter recess with a revival of Racine's *Andromaque*, which three years before had aroused an enthusiasm the like of which had not been witnessed since the days of the *Cid*. The part of Hermione was to have been taken by Mlle. Des Œillettes, who had created it; but she was lying ill of a malady from which she died not long afterwards, and it was in consequence decided to entrust it to Mlle. Champmeslé. Racine, who knew nothing of the new recruit, and feared that such a difficult rôle might suffer in the hands of an actress who had never interpreted anything more important than the insipid heroines of Boyer and Visé, refused at first to attend the performance, and, though he ultimately consented to be present, did so with evident reluctance. His apprehensions were groundless. "Mlle. de Champmeslé's rendering of the first two acts was very weak," relates the Abbé de Laporte in his *Annales dramatiques*. These

acts, where Hermione is in turn attracted and repelled by Pyrrhus, require a profound knowledge of the stage and great *finesse*. But in the last acts, where she is a frenzied lover, with whom jealousy carries all before it and to whom a supreme betrayal leaves nothing but vengeance to live for, she retrieved her ground so completely, threw so much fire into her acting, and rendered the passions with such real fervour that she was enthusiastically applauded."

At the conclusion of the play, Racine, enraptured with the young actress's rendering of his heroine, hurried to her dressing-room, and, falling on his knees, overwhelmed her with compliments and thanks. A few days later, Mlle. Des Œilletts was sufficiently recovered to pay a visit to the theatre to witness the performance of the new star; and, when the curtain fell, was seen to throw up her hands and exclaim sorrowfully: "Des Œilletts is no more!"—words which, coming from an actress who sees herself dethroned by an understudy, are more eloquent than the most exhaustive commentary.

Overjoyed at finding that such an actress had arisen, Racine gave his new interpreter lessons in elocution, "at the same time studying her natural peculiarities, with a view to making them serviceable in any character he might wish her to represent." According to the poet's son, Louis Racine, Mlle. de Champmeslé owed her subsequent successes entirely to his father's teaching. "As he had formed Baron," he says, "he formed the Champmeslé, but with far more trouble. He made her understand the verses which she had to recite, showed her the gestures which were appropriate to each passage, and dictated to her the emphasis which she must employ."

There can be no doubt that Mlle. de Champmeslé owed much to Racine's tuition, but it is equally certain that she had great natural gifts as an actress, the chief of which were a peculiar grace of movement and the greatest of all theatrical seductions, a most enchanting voice, which moved La Fontaine to write:—

“ Est-il quelqu'un que votre voix n'enchanter ?  
S'en trouve-t-il une aussi touchante,  
Un autre allant si droit au cœur ? ”

The flexibility of her voice appears to have been quite extraordinary. Melodious, soft, and caressing in rôles like Iphigénie or Monime, it became so powerful and sonorous in such parts as Phèdre, Roxane, and Hermione that, it is said, when the door of the box at the end of the *salle* happened to be open, it could be heard at the Café Procope, over the way. “ The recitation of actors in tragedy,” says the anonymous author of the *Entretiens galants*, “ is a kind of chant, and you will readily admit that the Champmeslé would not please you so much, if her voice were less agreeable. But she has learned to modulate it with so much skill, and she lends to her words such natural tones, that it would seem that she really has in her heart the passions she expresses with her mouth.” In pathetic passages, we are told, she drew tears from the eyes of the most hardened playgoers. “ It was amusing to watch the ladies sighing and drying their eyes and the men laughing at them, while they themselves were hard put to restrain their emotion.”

There seems to be some difference of opinion as to whether Mlle. de Champmeslé was strictly beautiful. According to the Brothers Parfaict, “ her skin was not

clear, and her eyes were very small and round." On the other hand, she was "of a fine shape, well made and noble," and "her defects were, so to speak, counter-balanced by the natural graces spread over her whole person." Louis Racine, though he denies her talent, admits that she was handsome; while Madame de Sévigné tells us that she was "almost plain," but "adorable upon the stage." However that may be, she did not lack for admirers, and Racine, who, two years before, had lost his mistress, the beautiful Mlle. du Parc—the actress who had in turn rejected the addresses of Molière, Pierre Corneille, and La Fontaine—speedily fell in love with her, and installed her in the vacant place in his affections, M. de Champmeslé accepting his dishonour with fashionable complacency. Henceforth, as Molière had written for his wife, Racine wrote for his mistress, who created all his great heroines, and "investing them with her own charm, became in truth the *collaboratrice* of the poet."

" Bénissons de l'amour l'influence divine,  
C'est à toi, Champmeslé, que nous devons Racine,  
Il écrivait pour toi, de ta plaire occupé,  
Son vers coulait plus doux de son cœur échappé."

In the early spring of 1670, Louis XIV.'s sister-in-law, the ill-fated Henrietta of England, daughter of Charles I., persuaded Corneille and Racine to write each a tragedy on the story of Titus and Berenice, without each other's knowledge, and consequently without the knowledge of any one else. Her object in so doing was, in all probability, merely to bring the relative merits of the two great dramaists to a decisive test, though rumour assigned a romantic reason for her choice of the



JEAN RACINE

From an engraving by VERTUE



subject, to wit, a desire to see upon the stage a little story analogous to that of her one-time relations with Louis XIV. *Madame's* death, famous for its disputed causes and Bossuet's funeral oration, occurred in the following June; but this did not interfere with the completion of the plays, which were produced within a few days of one another, the secret having been so well kept that until then neither of the poets had the faintest conception that they had been simultaneously engaged on the same subject.

Racine was the first in the field, his *Bérénice* being produced at the Hôtel de Bourgogne on November 21, Floridor playing Titus, and Mlle. de Champmeslé the beautiful Jewess. Corneille's *Tite et Bérénice* appeared at the Palais-Royal, eight days later, with La Thorillière and Mlle. Molière in the title-parts.

The result of the duel to which the two dramatists found themselves, all unwittingly, committed was wholly in favour of the younger, Corneille's play, notwithstanding some fine passages, being unworthy of his reputation.<sup>1</sup> It was probably to this fact and to the admirable acting of Mlle. de Champmeslé, rather than to any special merits of his own, that Racine was indebted for his easy triumph. Approved by the king and applauded by the public, his *Bérénice* remained in the bills until after the thirtieth performance; but it did not please the critics, Boileau declaring that had he been consulted he would have endeavoured to dissuade his friend from under-

<sup>1</sup> It was performed twenty-one times, and the average receipts were 680 livres. But for twenty-four representations of Molière's comedy, the *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, which was played concurrently with *Tite et Bérénice*, the average takings were 1000 livres. Corneille received 2000 livres for his play, the same amount as Molière had paid him for *Attila*.

taking so poor a theme; while Chapelle, when asked by Racine for his opinion, replied in two verses of an old song :—

“ Marion pleure, Marion crie,  
Marion veut qu'on la marie.”

An answer which nearly caused a quarrel between him and the poet.

To *Bérénice*, early in the following January, succeeded *Bajazet*, Mlle. de Champmeslé playing the part of Roxane. Madame de Sévigné attended the fifth performance, and next day writes to Madame de Grignan: “We have been to see the new play by Racine, and thought it admirable. My *daughter-in-law*<sup>1</sup> is, in my opinion, the best performer I ever saw. She is a hundred leagues in front of Des Œillets, and I, who am supposed to have some talent for acting, am not worthy to light the candles when she appears. . . . I wish you had been with me that afternoon; I am sure you would not have thought your time ill spent. You would have dropped a tear or two, for I myself shed twenty; besides, you would have greatly admired your *sister-in-law*.”<sup>2</sup> *Bajazet* printed, the Marchioness sent her daughter a copy: “If I could send Champmeslé with it, you would find the tragedy among the best; without her, it loses half its value. Racine’s plays are written for Champmeslé, and not for posterity. Whenever he grows old and ceases to be in love, it will be seen whether or not I am mistaken.”<sup>3</sup>

Mlle. de Champmeslé did not by any means confine her creations to her lover’s heroines; the *répertoire* of

<sup>1</sup> See p. 108 *infra*.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of January 13, 1673

<sup>3</sup> Letter of March 1673.



the Hôtel de Bourgogne was a rich one. Thus, in March of that same year, she appeared in the title-part in *Ariane*, a new tragedy by her fellow-townsmen, Thomas Corneille. This play was praised by some critics, but, in all probability, owed its success almost entirely to her impersonation of the heroine, "which drew the public as the light draws the moth." Madame de Sévigné was again among the audience, and wrote of the actress in terms of enthusiasm: "The Champmeslé is something so extraordinary that in your life you never saw any one like her. It is the actress that people flock to see, not the play. I went to *Ariane* entirely for the sake of seeing her. The tragedy is insipid; the rest of the players wretched. But when the Champmeslé appears, every one is enthralled, and the tears of the audience flow at her despair."<sup>1</sup>

When, seven years later, Mlle. de Champmeslé migrated to the Théâtre Guénégaud, it was in *Ariane* that she secured her first triumph. "*Ariane*," wrote Donneau de Visé in the *Mercure*, "has been extremely well attended. Mlle. de Champmeslé, that inimitable actress, has drawn tears from the majority of the audience." The natural manner of her acting and her pathetic rendering of the hapless heroine gave indeed to the play a new lease of life.

Another brilliant success awaited her in the part of Monime, in Racine's *Mithridate*, produced on January 13, 1673, the day after its author's reception at the Academy. The play was received with enthusiasm; and Madame de Coulanges wrote to Madame de Sévigné, then on a visit to her daughter, in Provence: "*Mithridate* is charming; you see it thirty times, and the thirtieth

<sup>1</sup> Letter of April 1673.

it seems finer than the first.”<sup>1</sup> On March 4, it was played at Saint-Cloud, before *Monsieur* (the Duc d’Orléans), the Duke of Monmouth, Madame de Guise, the Princesse de Monaco, and other distinguished persons; and, in the following August, at Saint-Ouen, where Boisfranc, *Surintendant des Finances* to *Monsieur*, was entertaining a party from the Court. For her rôle, which was a most exacting one—Mlle. Clairon confesses in her *Mémoires*, that she had never succeeded in playing it entirely to her satisfaction—Mlle. de Champmeslé appears to have received very careful instruction from Racine; and the critics were agreed that seldom had anything more expressive and charming than her acting been seen. She was particularly admirable in the scene in the third act, where Monime inadvertently confesses to the jealous Mithridate her love for his son Xiphanès. “Her cry of anguish when she sees that she has betrayed the secret of her heart, sent a shudder through every vein of the spectators and transported them with emotion.” Brossette tells us that one day, when dining with Boileau, the conversation turned on the subject of declamation, whereupon the poet repeated this passage in the tone of Mlle. de Champmeslé, as a perfect example of the art.

While Mlle. de Champmeslé continued her successes, Racine completed his eighth tragedy, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, which was produced at Versailles (August 17, 1674), on the occasion of the magnificent *divertissements* which Louis XIV. gave to his Court on his return from the conquest of Franche-Comté. This time the performance was given in the open air, in the gardens of the château. “The scenery,” says Andre Félibien, in his

<sup>1</sup> Letter of February 24, 1673.

account of the fêtes, “represented a long alley of verdure; on either side were the basins of fountains, and, at intervals, grottoes of rustic workmanship, but very delicately finished. On their entablature rose a balustrade, on which were arranged vases of porcelain filled with flowers. The basins of the fountains were of white marble supported by gilded tritons, and in these basins one saw others of greater height, which bore tall statues of gold. The alley terminated at the back of the theatre in awnings, which were connected with those covering the orchestra, and beyond appeared a long alley, which was the alley of the Orangery itself, bordered on both sides by tall orange- and pomegranate-trees, interspersed with several vases of porcelain containing various kinds of flowers. Between each tree were large candelabra and stands of gold and azure, which supported girandoles of crystal lighted by several candles. This alley terminated in a marble portico; the pilasters which supported the cornice were of lapis, and the door was all of gold work.”<sup>1</sup>

In writing *Iphigénie*, Racine had departed considerably from his Greek model, discarding the catastrophe in favour of the legend as recorded by Pausanias, wherein it is discovered, at the eleventh hour, that not the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, but another princess is the victim intended by the gods. Inferior to the noble tragedy of Euripides, the play was, nevertheless, generally acknowledged to be an advance on anything that Racine had yet attempted, and

<sup>1</sup> *Les divertissements de Versailles donnez par le roy à toute sa cour, au retour de la conquête de la Franche-Comté, en l'année 1674: Paris, 1676, folio.* A copy of this very rare and valuable work, with its beautiful engravings by La Paute and Chauveau, is in the possession of the British Museum.

was a brilliant and unanimous success; a success of emotion, to which Mlle. de Champmeslé's pathetic impersonation of the young Greek virgin probably contributed as much as the subject itself, and inspired Boileau to the lines:—

“Jamais Iphigénie en Aulide immolée,  
N’a conté tant de pleurs à la Grèce assemblée,  
Que dans l’heureux spectacle à nos yeux étalé  
En a fait, sous son nom, verser la Champmêlé.”

The capital witnessed the new play in the early days of January 1675, and confirmed the judgment of the Court: indeed, for once, criticism appears to have been almost silenced, and the worst that Barbier d’Aucour, a bitter detractor of the poet, could find to say, was that *Iphigénie* had caused a rise in the price of handkerchiefs.

After *Iphigénie*, Mlle. de Champmeslé became the idol of the playgoing public, and “all Paris” flocked to the Hôtel de Bourgogne, seemingly indifferent to the bill, provided they could see the now famous actress. For nearly two years, however, no rôle at all commensurate with her abilities appears to have fallen to her lot; for Racine was at work on a new tragedy, which, had he never written anything else, would have sufficed to ensure him a high place among tragic dramatists. The story goes that one day, in Madame La Fayette’s salon, Racine contended that it was within the power of a great poet to make the darkest crimes appear more or less excusable—nay, to arouse compassion for the criminals themselves. In his opinion, even Medea and Phædra might become objects of pity rather than abhorrence upon the stage. From this view his hearers dissented strongly, showing indeed some inclination to turn it into ridicule;

whereupon, in order to convince them of their error, the dramatist determined to measure his strength once more against that of Euripides, and to make the fatal passion of Phædra for her stepson the subject of a tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

But alas ! *Phèdre et Hippolyte* was not destined to take its place as the greatest tragedy of the French classical school without bringing cruel mortification to its author. Racine, by his success, had made many enemies and many more by the caustic wit which he was in the habit of exercising at the expense of any one who happened to incur his displeasure. Among those whom he had contrived to offend were the Duchesse de Bouillon, the fourth of the famous Mancini sisters, and Madame Deshoulières, a clever but pretentious poetess, whose verses Racine had, perhaps unduly, depreciated. No sooner did the two ladies in question ascertain the subject of the forthcoming play than they engaged a young and conceited poet named Pradon, author of a couple of indifferent tragedies, to enter the lists against the famous dramatist and compose a rival *Phèdre*, to be produced at the Théâtre Guénégaud simultaneously with the appearance of Racine's at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Pradon had only three months allowed him ; but, nothing daunted, he set to work and completed his task within the allotted time and to his own entire satisfaction. In his vanity, he made no secret of his intention of measuring swords with Racine ; and Boileau represented to his friend that it would be more in keeping with his dignity to decline the challenge and postpone the production of his play. But the latter, stung to the

<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, "Annals of the French Stage," ii. 116.

quick by the conspiracy which had been formed against him, and urged on by Mlle. de Champmeslé, "who had learned her part and wanted money," decided that it should appear on the date originally fixed.

The play was accordingly produced on New Year's Day 1677, Mlle. de Champmeslé, of course, impersonating the heroine. Pradon's tragedy was to have appeared on the same evening; but the difficulty of finding an actress willing to undertake the principal rôle—it was refused by both Mlle. de Brie and Mlle. Molière—necessitated a postponement of two days, when Mlle. du Pin, a capable, but by no means brilliant, performer, played Phèdre. Pradon ascribed the refusals of the two leading actresses of the company to the machinations of Racine and his friends; but, though Racine was certainly not over-scrupulous in his dealings with his professional rivals, it is more probable that the ladies in question were, not unnaturally, reluctant to challenge comparison with the all-conquering Mlle. de Champmeslé, in a part which was obviously so much better suited to her talents than to theirs.

All went well at the Hôtel de Bourgogne the first evening. M. de Champmeslé himself took possession of the box-office, and when any of the leaders of the rival faction appeared, courteously informed them that every seat in the front part of the house was already occupied; the result being that Racine's admirers had the theatre to themselves, and the play was accorded a reception which could not fail to satisfy the most exacting dramatist. The following evening, however, matters were very different; to the chagrin of the author and the astonishment of the company, every box on the first tier was empty! The same thing occurred the

next evening and the next after that, while, to increase the mystery and the poet's mortification, the boxes at the Théâtre Guénégaud were reported as crowded with applauding spectators. The explanation was that the Duchesse de Bouillon, in her determination to secure the success of her *protégé's* play and the ruin of her enemy's, had adopted the ingenious device of engaging in advance all the front seats at both houses, filling those at the Théâtre Guénégaud with her friends and leaving the others empty.

Racine was in despair; for that not inconsiderable section of the public which judges of the merits of a play solely by results was beginning to declare that his tragedy was a complete failure and Pradon's a brilliant success. After, however, the trick had been played for three more nights, he triumphed. Perhaps Madame de Bouillon had begun to find her amusement, which is said to have cost her 15,000 francs, the equivalent of five times as much to-day, somewhat too costly a one; or possibly Racine, discovering the tactics of his enemies, had appealed to the king for protection, and the duchess had received a hint from his Majesty that such practices were highly displeasing to him. Any way, the lady retired from the field, and, with her withdrawal, the rival *Phèdres* speedily found their respective levels. Nevertheless, in spite of his ultimate success, Racine never forgot the mortification to which he had been subjected, and there can be no doubt that this had not a little to do with his decision to renounce writing for the stage.

When *Phèdre* was played before the Court, Mlle. de Champmeslé, fearing that Madame de Montespan might take the lines afterwards addressed on a memorable

occasion by Adrienne Lecouvrier to the Duchesse de Bouillon:—

“ Je suis mes perfidies  
 Œnone, et ne suis pas de ces femmes hardies  
 Qui, goûtant dans la crime une tranquille paix,  
 Ont su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais ”—

to apply to herself, begged Racine to alter or erase them. The poet, however, though he yielded the palm to no one as a flatterer of royalty, and was, moreover, under considerable obligations to the king's mistress, indignantly refused to mutilate his play. Several of those present remarked upon the verses; but Madame de Montespan had too much good sense to complain.

As *Phèdre*, the declamation of which, according to the Abbe du Bois, Racine “had taught her verse by verse,” Mlle. de Champmeslé seems to have put the *comble* upon her fame as a *tragédienne*. Of all her creations, it is the one that La Fontaine names first in the frontispiece of *Belphegor*:—

“ Qui ne connaît l'inimitable actrice  
 Représentant *Phèdre* ou *Bérénice*,  
*Chimène* en pleurs ou *Camille* en fureur ?  
 Est-il quelqu'un qui cette voix n'enchanter ? ”

So inimitable was she in this character, affording her as it did an opportunity for the display of all the resources of her art, that *Phèdre* was the play selected to consecrate the birth of the Comédie-Française on Sunday, August 25, 1680; and it was *Phèdre* again, with Mlle. de Champmeslé in the title-part, which inaugurated the new playhouse in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain, on April 16, 1689.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. J. Noury, *La Champmeslé*, p. 193.



The popularity of Mlle. Champmeslé was not confined to the theatre. Her house was "the rendezvous of all persons of distinction of the Court and the town, as well as of the most celebrated writers of the time." Among the former were Charles de Sévigné, Madame de Sévigné's troublesome son, the Marquis de la Fare, the author of the curious and all-too-brief memoirs, and the Comtes de Revel and Clermont-Tonnerre. The latter, besides Racine, included Boileau, Valincourt, Racine's successor at the Academy, Chapelle, and La Fontaine, "who very much regretted that he was only a friend" of his charming hostess. The utmost cordiality and an entire absence of the restraints of etiquette characterised these gatherings, and noblemen and writers met on a footing of perfect equality. "Permit me to address you," writes Boileau to the Comte de Revel, in April 1701, "in the familiar tone to which you formerly accustomed me at the house of the famous Champmeslé."

The actress's *liaison* with Racine was not only public but accepted by the easy morality of the day; Madame de Sévigné jests about it in her letters, and La Fontaine, writing to Mlle. de Champmeslé, mentions it as the most natural thing in the world. Many years afterwards, Boileau reminds Racine of the numerous bottles of champagne which were drunk by the lady's accommodating husband. "You know," adds he, "at whose expense."

According to M. Larroumet, Racine's latest biographer, the poet's passion for the interpreter of his heroines was of a less defensible kind than that which he had felt for her predecessor in his affections, Mlle. du Parc, "with whom he had experienced a sentiment which had the dignity of love." M. Larroumet is of opinion

that "he only loved her with the facile love which the professionals of gallantry frequently inspire."

However that may be, the lady appears to have been very far from faithful to the poet. An epigram by Boileau, which is rather too *gai* for us to transcribe, speaks of "six lovers" (including the husband), and of M. de Champmeslé living on the best of terms with the others and his wife. The favoured gentlemen appear to have been Racine and the four noblemen mentioned above. But the only one of the four about whose relations with the actress we have any details is Charles de Sévigné.

This young gentleman seems to have had something of the Oriental in his temperament; for, at the time that he was paying court to the actress, he was "wearing the chains of Ninon, this same Ninon who corrupted the morals of his father."<sup>1</sup> The celebrated Ninon de Lenclos, it may be mentioned, was then in her fifty-sixth year, but still retained much of her former fascination; indeed, if tradition is to be believed, she had lovers when she was over eighty!

Madame de Sévigné was much distressed by the conduct of her son. "Madame de la Fayette and I are using every effort to wean him from so dangerous an attachment," she writes to her daughter. "Besides, he has a little actress (Mlle. de Champmeslé) and all the Despréaux and the Racines. There are delicious suppers—that is to say, *diableries*." Then, on March 18: "Your brother is at Saint-Germain. He divides his time between Ninon and a little actress, and, to crown all, Despréaux.

<sup>1</sup> Letter of Madame de Sévigné to Madame de Grignan, March 13, 1671.

We lead him a sad life. Ye gods, what folly ! Ye gods, what folly ! ”

From the above passages, it would appear that Racine and his friend Boileau were not exactly in the odour of sanctity with their contemporaries ; indeed, both were evidently regarded as corrupters of youth by anxious mothers like Madame de Sévigné.

Three weeks later, we learn that M. de Sévigné is not prospering in his love-affairs ; Ninon has dismissed him, and Mlle. de Champmeslé is on the point of following her example : “ A word or two concerning your brother. Ninon has given him his *congé*. She is tired of loving without being loved in return ; she has insisted upon his returning her letters, which he has accordingly done. I was not a little pleased at the separation. I gave him a hint of the duty he owed to God, reminded him of his former good sentiments, and entreated him not to stifle all notion of religion in his breast. But this is not all ; when one side fails us, we think to repair it with the other, and are deceived. The young Merveille (Mlle. de Champmeslé) has not broken with him, but she will soon, I believe. . . . The poor Chimène says she sees plainly that he no longer loves her, and has applied himself elsewhere. In short, this affair makes me laugh ; but I wish sincerely it may be the means of weaning him from a state so offensive to God and hurtful to his own soul. Ninon told him that he was a *pompion fricasseed in snow*. See what it is to keep good company ! One learns such elegant expressions.”

Then, on April 17, Madame de Sévigné informs her daughter that the young gentleman's health has broken down under the strain of “ the abandoned life he had led during Holy Week,” and that he can “ scarcely bear

a woman in his presence." Profiting by his remorse, his fond mother becomes his confessor: "I took the opportunity to preach him a little sermon on the subject, and we both indulged in some Christian reflections. He seems to approve my sentiments, particularly now that his disgust is at its height. He showed me some letters that he had recovered from his actress. I never read anything so warm, so passionate; he wept, he died; he believed it all while he was writing it, and laughed at it a moment afterwards. I assure you that he is worth his weight in gold."

Finally, on April 22, the marchioness writes that all is at an end between her son and Mlle. de Champmeslé, and that she has been instrumental in preventing the young man from playing a singularly mean trick upon his former enchantress: "He has left his actress at last, after having followed her everywhere. When he saw her, he was in earnest; a moment later, he would make the greatest game of her. Ninon has completely discarded him; he was miserable while she loved him, and now that she loves him no longer, he is in absolute despair. She wished him, the other day, to give her the letters he had received from his actress, which he did. You must know that she was jealous of that princess, and wanted to show them to a lover of hers, in the hope of procuring her a few blows with a belt. He came and told me, when I pointed out to him how shameful it was to treat this little creature so badly, merely for having loved him; that she had not shown people his letters, as some would have him believe, but, on the contrary, had returned them to him again; that such treacherous conduct was unworthy of a man of quality, and that there was a degree of honour to be observed, even in things dishonourable in

themselves. He acquiesced in the justice of my remarks, hurried at once to Ninon's house, and, partly by strategy and partly by force, got the poor devil's letters out of her hands. I made him burn them. You see by this what a regard I have for the reputation of an actress."

According to M. Gueullette (*Acteurs et Actrices du temps passé*), Racine, though deeply in love with Mlle. de Champmeslé, supported patiently the numerous infidelities of the lady, "so long as he believed them to be passing fancies and that he was still beloved." But when the actress embarked upon a more serious love-affair with the Comte de Clermont-Tonnerre, and a wit wrote—

"À la plus tendre amour elle fut destinée  
Qui prit longtemps Racine dans son cœur :  
Mais, par un insigne malheur,  
Le *Tonnerre* est venu, qui l'a *déracinée*"—

he was so bitterly mortified that he left her never to return.

The brothers Parfaict and d'Allainval assert that disgust at his treatment at the hands of Mlle. de Champmeslé was the immediate cause of Racine's retirement from dramatic authorship, at the age of thirty-eight, at the height of his talent, in the heyday of his success; for after *Phèdre* he wrote but two more plays, *Esther* and *Athalie*, which were performed by the young girls of Saint-Cyr, and were not seen upon the Paris stage until many years after his death. This, however, is very unlikely, and it is quite possible, as M. Larroumet suggests, that Racine, instead of abandoning the theatre, because Mlle. de Champmeslé had discarded him, discarded the actress, because he had abandoned the theatre. The poet's retirement indeed seems to have been attributable to several

different motives: disgust at the shameful cabal against *Phèdre* and the various annoyances to which it gave rise; the fear that a repetition of such tactics might jeopardise his position as the greatest tragic dramatist of his time; weariness of a dissipated life, and, above all, the awakening, after a sleep of many years, of the religious sentiments with which his old teachers of Port-Royal had inspired him in youth. Indignation at Mlle. Champmeslé's conduct may, of course, have had something to do with the positive antipathy to the theatre which he manifested in his last years;<sup>1</sup> but to assert that it was the cause of his renunciation of a profession which had brought him fame and fortune is to credit him with a capacity for sincere affection which he certainly never possessed.

With Racine departed not a little of the immense popularity which the theatre had enjoyed during the past half-century, for though of capable actors there was, fortunately, no lack, dramatists of even moderate ability were few and far between. In place of *Andromaques* and *Iphigénies* and *Phèdres*, Mlle. de Champmeslé had to resign herself to appear in such deservedly-forgotten plays as the *Achille* of Thomas Corneille, the *Argélie* of the Abbé Abeille, and the *Troade* of Pradon. Nevertheless, despite the barrenness of the field in which she laboured, she contrived to gather fresh laurels, and her masterly impersonation of Queen Elizabeth in Thomas

<sup>1</sup> "You know," he wrote to his son, Louis Racine, "what I have said to you about operas and plays; there will probably be some performances at Marly; the King and the Court are aware of the scruples which I entertain about attending them, and they will have a poor opinion of you, if you show so little regard for my sentiments. I know that you will not be dishonoured before men should you go to the play, but do you count it nothing to be dishonoured before God?"

Corneille's *Comte d'Essex* (January 1678) was enthusiastically received, and secured for a mediocre play a success out of all proportion to its merits. "One might have said of her," remarks M. Noury, "as a critic said of Adrienne Lecouvreur, after seeing her in the same part, 'I have seen a queen among actors.' She possessed, in fact, majesty."

At Easter 1679, in consequence of some dissensions with their colleagues, Mlle. de Champmeslé and her husband quitted the Hôtel de Bourgogne, where they had played for nineteen years, for the Théâtre Guénégaud, which, by a contract dated April 12, awarded them, "in gratitude," in addition to a full share of the profits, an annual allowance of one thousand livres. All her contemporaries are agreed that this defection was the principal cause of the fusion of the two troupes in the following year. Deprived of the services of the famous actress, the Hôtel de Bourgogne was no longer able to cope with its powerful rivals in the Rue Mazarine.

On the formation of the new company, the Champmeslés figured at the head of the list of the twenty-seven players nominated by Louis XIV., and Mlle. Champmeslé was at once recognised as the mainstay of the theatre in tragedy, as Mlle. Molière—or rather Mlle. Guérin, as she had now become—was in comedy. Her husband, too, proved himself well worthy of his place, not only as an actor, but as a playwright. His *Parisien* (produced February 5, 1682), as we have said elsewhere, provided Mlle. Guérin with one of her greatest triumphs, and he secured another success in his *Fragments de Molière*, an amusing piece, in which various characters from Molière's plays were introduced.

Mlle. de Champmeslé's successes did not make her

forget her relatives. Her brother, Nicolas Desmares, was at this time acting at Copenhagen, in the troupe subsidised by Christian V. That monarch held the actor and his wife, Anne d'Ennebaut, in high esteem, and, in 1682, in imitation of Louis XIV.'s conduct in regard to Molière, he and his queen stood sponsors to their little daughter, Christine Antoinette Charlotte Desmares, destined, in years to come, to emulate the triumphs of her famous aunt. Three years later, Mlle. de Champmeslé persuaded her brother to return to France, and obtained from the King permission for him to be received into the Comédie-Française, "*sans début*." For an actor to be admitted a member of so famous a company without being required to give proofs of his capabilities, was a privilege which had never yet been accorded, and the playgoing public was up in arms at what it was pleased to consider a scandalous piece of nepotism. So great was the indignation that when Desmares made his first appearance, on May 7, 1685, in *Téramène*, an angry scene was apprehended; but the new *sociétaire's* acting was so admirable that the hisses were soon drowned in a storm of applause.

When, in 1689, the Comédie-Française, ousted from the Rue Mazarine, migrated to its new home in the Rue Neuve-des-Fossés-Saint-Germain, Mlle. de Champmeslé, in spite of advancing years, continued her triumphant career, her remarkable talents and enthusiasm enabling her to secure some measure of success for even the most insipid tragedy. Apart from revivals of the great masterpieces of Corneille and Racine, perhaps her most notable success was gained in the part of Judith in the Abbé Boyer's tragedy of that name, produced in March 1795, when she was in her fifty-fourth year. This play had a



singular history. For some time it created a perfect *furor*, and the theatre could with difficulty accommodate the crowds which presented themselves nightly at the doors. "The seats on the stage," says Le Sage, "had to be given up by the men to the women, whose handkerchiefs were spread upon their knees, to wipe away the tears to be called forth by touching passages. The usual occupants of the seats had to be content with the wings. In the fourth act, there was a scene which proved particularly moving, and, for that reason, was called the '*scène des mouchoirs*.' The pit, where laughers are always to be found, made itself merry at the expense of these impressionable ladies, instead of weeping with them."

Intoxicated by his success, the Gascon poet, in an evil hour for himself, determined to allow his work to be printed, and it was published during the Easter recess. It was, of course, eagerly bought, but no sooner did people begin to read the book, than they made the discovery that this tragedy, which the author's indiscreet admirers had been comparing to *Polyeucte* and *Phèdre*, was, in truth, a most mediocre play, which clearly owed its phenomenal success to the religious nature of the subject and Mlle. de Champmeslé's brilliant impersonation of the Judæan heroine. The indignation of the public against the unhappy abbé, who, it seemed to consider, had perpetrated a kind of fraud at its expense, knew no bounds, and it was forthwith decided that *Judith* must be driven with ignominy from the boards. Accordingly, when the curtain rose on Quasimodo Sunday—the usual evening for the reopening of the theatre—the players, whose appearance for so many nights had been the signal for prolonged applause, were received with a storm of hisses and derisive laughter. "Then," continues Le Sage, "Mlle. de

Champmeslé, actress worthy of eternal remembrance, astonished to hear such a symphony, when her ears were accustomed only to applause, addressed the pit as follows : ‘Gentlemen, we are rather surprised that you should receive so badly to-day a play which you applauded during Lent.’ To which a voice replied : ‘The hisses were at Versailles, at the sermons of the Abbé Boileau.’”<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. de Champmeslé continued on the stage until the end of her life, for, with her, acting would seem to have been not only a profession, but a passion and a delight. As she grew old, however, she naturally began to feel the strain of such constant exertion, and the efforts she was called upon to make in order to secure the success of Longpierre’s *Médée*, in February 1694, brought on a somewhat severe illness. She recovered and resumed her place in the company; but, four years later, during the run of the *Oreste et Pilade* of La Grange-Chancel, which the author modestly asserts “drew as many tears as the *Iphigénie* of M. Racine,” she was taken seriously ill and ordered by the doctors a complete rest. She retired to Auteuil, which was “already sprinkled with fine houses and noted among suburban villages for the purity of its atmosphere.” Here Boileau had a villa, with a delightful garden attached, in which he was in the habit of entertaining all the literary celebrities of the day, from Racine to Madame Deshoulières; and in summer the village was a favourite health resort of those Parisians whose means did not permit of a visit to Dieppe.

The air of Auteuil, however, was powerless to cure Mlle. de Champmeslé. She grew gradually worse, and early in May, it was seen that her end was near. Then arose the question of the administration of the last Sacra-

<sup>1</sup> Charles Boileau, Abbé of Beaulieu, and a member of the Academy.

ments; but before speaking of this, it may be as well for us to glance back and see what had been the practice of the Church in regard to the theatrical profession during the quarter of a century which had elapsed since the death of Molière.

If any hopes had existed that the distressing incidents which had accompanied the death of the great actor-dramatist had been merely the outcome of the hostility of the Church towards a particular individual, and, as such, were unlikely to be repeated, they were speedily doomed to disappointment. Henceforth, the penalties denounced against the profession by the early councils were no longer suffered to remain a dead letter, but were enforced with the most merciless severity. The actor found himself excommunicated both in life and death. Marriage, absolution, the Holy Sacrament, baptism, all were denied him; and he was even refused Christian burial. In one way, and in one way only, could he escape this infamous proscription, which was publicly proclaimed every Sunday from every pulpit in Paris, namely, by renouncing his profession, surrendering his means of livelihood, forfeiting, in the case of a member of the Comédie-Française, the pension to which he was entitled after twenty years' service.

In 1684, Brécourt, an actor of the Comédie-Française, died. On his death-bed he sent for the curé of Saint-Sulpice; but that priest refused to administer the Sacraments until the actor had executed a deed formally renouncing his profession, which was signed by him and four ecclesiastics.<sup>1</sup> Shortly afterwards, two other players,

<sup>1</sup> Here is the renunciation: "In the presence of M. Claude Botte de la Barondière, priest, doctor of theology of the Sorbonne, curé of the

Raisin and Sallé, were compelled to subscribe to similar documents, in the presence of a notary.

Two years later, Rosimont died suddenly without having had time to abjure his errors. Notwithstanding a fondness for good liquor, he was a sincerely religious man, having published a translation of the Psalms in verse, and also written, or collaborated in, a *Vie des saints pour tous les jours de l'année*. This fact, however, was not permitted to have any weight with the bigoted curé of Saint-Sulpice, and the remains of poor Rosimont were interred, without any ceremony, in a part of the cemetery reserved for unbaptized children.

It must not be supposed that, outside the capital, the proscription of the actor was general. In the provinces it varied, according to the views of the different bishops and the particular ritual observed, and in some dioceses the penalties were not enforced at all. Moreover, even among the clergy themselves, men of liberal opinions were not wanting to protest vigorously against the folly and injustice of reviving superannuated anathemas, intended to apply to the sanguinary games of the circus and the scandalous performances of the Roman theatre, against the interpreters of the tragedies of Corneille and Racine and

church and parish of Saint-Sulpice, at Paris, and the witnesses herein-after named, Guillaume Marconnau de Brécourt has declared that, having formerly followed the profession of an actor, he renounces it, and promises, with a true and sincere heart, to exercise it no more, even if restored to full and complete health."—Extract from the Register of Saint-Sulpice, cited by M. Gaston Maugras, *Les Comédiens hors la loi*, p. 154 *note*.

It appears also to have been customary in the case of an actor to pin to the register of deaths the following paper: "The said person was not absolved and received into holy ground until after having publicly renounced the profession he had formerly exercised, by an act before the notaries."

the comedies of Molière. In 1694, a Theatine monk, one Père Caffaro by name, published, under the cloak of anonymity, a very able letter, entitled *Lettre d'un Théologien*, wherein he asserted that "the theatre, as it then existed in France, contained only lessons of virtue, humanity, and morality, and nothing to which the most chaste ear could not give its attention." He further pointed out that the highest dignitaries of the Church—bishops, cardinals, and nuncios—had no scruples about visiting the theatre, and, therefore, if it was to be condemned, they must be condemned also, "since they authorised it by their presence"; and concluded by eulogising the exemplary life led by so many members of the proscribed profession, and their abounding charity, "to which magistrates and the superiors of convents could bear ample testimony."

This letter made a great stir, and brought Bossuet—then regarded as the mouthpiece of the Gallican Church—into the field to crush the imprudent Theatine. The bishop called upon the monk to retract his statements, and published a treatise called *Maximes et réflexions sur la comédie*, in which, after denouncing the plays most in vogue, and in particular the comedies of Molière, which he stigmatised as full of "impieties and obscenities unfit for the ears of a Christian," he maintained that it was not only "the idolatry and the scandalous indecency" of the theatre that the Fathers of the Church had condemned, but "its uselessness, its prodigious dissipation, the passions which it excited, and the vanity and love of display which it aroused." According to him, the Church would excommunicate all Christians who frequented the theatre, were the number of offenders not so great.

Bossuet also asserted that actors had always been excommunicated. "The constant practice of the Church," he wrote, "is to deprive those who perform plays of the Sacraments, both in life and death, unless they renounce their art ; and to repulse them from the Holy Table as public sinners." This statement, as M. Maugras points out, in his able and interesting work, *Les Comédiens hors la loi*, was quite untrue. Up to the time of *Tartuffe*, the Church had shown the greatest indulgence towards the theatrical profession, and the old canons had remained a dead-letter.

Bossuet was followed in his campaign against the theatre by all the most eminent of the French clergy. Massillon, Fléchier, Bourdaloue, and Fénelon vied with one another in denouncing the unhappy actor in their sermons and writings.<sup>1</sup> Père Caffaro was compelled by the Archbishop of Paris to publicly disavow his letter, which, in fear and trembling, he now protested had been extracted from a work of his, written "in the levity of youth," and published without his knowledge or consent ; and the persecution, encouraged by the fact that the gloomy bigotry of the old King had led him to withdraw his protection from the theatre, grew more rigorous than ever.

Strangely enough, at the same time that the Church was mercilessly proscribing the French actors, it received with open arms the Italian players, who had definitely established themselves in Paris in 1660, admitted them

<sup>1</sup> Among Bossuet's supporters was Père Lebrun, of the Oratory, who published a *Discours sur la comédie*. One of this good father's chief objections to the theatre was "because it is perpetually turning into ridicule parents who strive to prevent their children from contracting love-matches."

to the Sacraments, allowed them to be married in church, and buried them in holy ground. This distinction appears the more inexplicable, as the French theatre was at this period as reserved and decent as the Italian was the reverse. The licence of the foreigners, indeed, knew no bounds, and finally their plays assumed so objectionable a character that, in 1697, they were expelled from France.<sup>1</sup> The probable explanation is, that the Gallican Church did not dare to proscribe the same persons whom the sovereign pontiffs tolerated in their realm, and whose performances were freely patronised by the Roman prelates and clergy.<sup>2</sup>

By another inconsistency, the indulgence shown to the Italian players was extended to the singers and dancers of the Opera. The reason given for this exemption was that the members of the Opera were not actors, as they did not bear the name. But, as we have seen, the canons of the early councils, upon which the bigots relied for their authority, made no distinction whatever between the different classes of public performers :

<sup>1</sup> According to Saint-Simon, the immediate cause of their expulsion was the representation of a licentious comedy, called *La Fausse Prude*, in which character Madame de Maintenon was easily recognised.

<sup>2</sup> In 1696, the French actors, desirous of testing the legality of the attitude of the Church towards them, addressed a petition to Innocent XII., in which, after representing that they performed in Paris "none but honest plays, purged of all obscenities, and more calculated to influence the faithful for good than for evil, and inspire them with a horror of vice and a love of virtue," they besought him to inform them if the bishops had the right to excommunicate them. The Holy See, however, unwilling to provoke a conflict with the independent French bishops, who, it well knew, would not hesitate to resist its orders, if it took the part of the actors, referred the petitioners to the Archbishop of Paris, "that they might be treated according to the law." A similar fate awaited a second appeal to Clement XI. in 1701.

actors, singers, dancers, mountebanks, jugglers, and circus performers were all included in one common anathema.<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. de Champmeslé had been greatly distressed at having to renounce her triumphs and the adulation of the public. Proud of the profession to which she owed her fame, she revolted from the idea of repudiating it, and for some time opposed a steady resistance to the solicitations of the curé of Auteuil, who besought her to make her peace with Heaven, or rather with the Church. Finally, however, she yielded, and the curé of Saint-Sulpice, to whose parish she belonged, was summoned to receive her renunciation. Under ordinary circumstances, as we have seen, the unfortunate actor or actress was compelled to give this undertaking in writing duly attested before a notary; but when the priest arrived the poor woman was at the point of death, and he was therefore compelled to content himself with a verbal declaration. This formality concluded, the curé of Auteuil gave the dying actress absolution and administered the last Sacraments; and on May 15, 1698, she passed quietly away, at the age of fifty-six.

On the morrow her body was brought to Paris, and interred at Saint-Sulpice, in the presence of the whole of the Comédie-Française.

That same day, Racine, now a *dévo*t of the most pronounced type, wrote to his son Louis, "with whom," says the poet's very candid biographer, M. Larroumet, "he ought never to have approached such a subject":—

"M. de Rost informed me the day before yesterday that the Champmeslé was *in extremis*, about which he

<sup>1</sup> M. Gaston Maugras, *Les Comédiens hors la loi*, p. 154 et seq.



appeared very distressed ; but what is more distressing is that which he apparently troubles little about, I mean the obstinacy with which this poor wretch refuses to renounce the play ; declaring, so I am told, that she is proud to die an actress. It is to be hoped that, when she sees death drawing nearer, she will change her tone, as is the rule with the majority of persons who give themselves such airs so long as they are in good health."

Two months later, he returns to the subject in these terms :—

"I must tell you, by the way, that I owe reparation to the memory of the Champmeslé, who died in a sufficiently good state of mind, after having renounced the play, very repentant for her past life, but especially distressed at having to die."

"There is no conversion," very justly remarks M. Larroumet, "that can possibly excuse such language as this."

Mlle. de Champmeslé left behind her two brilliant pupils. The first was Mlle. Duclos, daughter of a former member of the Marais troupe named Château-neuf, who made her *début* at the Comédie-Française in 1693, and was soon afterwards engaged to understudy the great actress in first tragedy parts. She excelled in rôles requiring "majesty of bearing and the impetuous sway of passion," and in such secured several notable successes ; but her style both of speaking and acting seems to have been very artificial. She was, moreover, cursed with a most abominable temper, which made her a perfect terror to her colleagues at rehearsals, and which she could not always control, even before the audience. At the first performance of La Motte's

*Inès de Castro*, in 1723, a scene which was intended to be intensely pathetic excited the merriment of the pit, upon which Mlle. Duclos, who was playing *Inès*, stopped the performance, and coming to the front of the stage, shouted angrily, "Foolish pit! You are laughing at the finest thing in the play." On another occasion, when Dancourt apologised to the audience for the lady's non-appearance in one of her most popular rôles, at the same time indicating, by a significant gesture, the cause of her indisposition, the actress, who happened to be standing in the wings, rushed on to the stage, beside herself with passion, and soundly boxed her facetious colleague's ears, amid roars of laughter. In 1733, when in her fifty-sixth year, Mlle. Duclos was foolish enough to marry an actor named Duchemin, a youth scarcely seventeen! Two years later, she was compelled to obtain a separation from her juvenile husband, whom she alleged had "maltreated her daily," and dealt her "*coups de pied et de poing tant sur le corps que sur le visage.*" Mlle. Duclos's most successful creation was *Zénobie*, in the *Rhadaminthe et Zénobie* of Crébillon, and among her other impersonations were Ariane, in Thomas Corneille's play of that name, Josabeth, in *Athalie*, Hersélie in La Motte's *Romulus*, and the title-part in the *Électre* of Longpierre. She retired, in 1733, with a pension of 1000 livres from the theatre, and another of the same amount from the court, which she enjoyed for twelve years.

The second of Mlle. de Champmeslé's pupils was her own niece, Charlotte Desmares, of whom we have already spoken. After playing in child-parts for some years at the Comédie-Française, Mlle. Desmares made her *début* in 1699, the year after her aunt's death. She

was an exceedingly pretty young woman, and, though inferior to Mlle. Duclos in declamatory tragedy, greatly her superior in pathetic rôles. Her best tragedy parts were Iphigénie in La Grange-Chancel's *Oreste et Pilade*, which had been Mlle. de Champmeslé's last creation, Sémiramis in Crébillon's play of that name, Jocaste in the *Œdipe* of Voltaire, and Antigone in La Motte's *Machabées*, which crowned her career. She was even more successful in comedy, and no better *soubrette* had been seen since the days of Madeleine Béjart. In 1715, she became the mistress of the Regent d'Orléans, by whom she had a daughter. "My son," wrote the old Duchesse d'Orléans, "has been presented with a daughter by the Desmares. She tried to pass off another child on him as his, but he replied, '*Non, celui-ci est par trop Arlequin.*'"

Mlle. Desmares retired from the stage in 1721, and died in 1743 at the age of sixty-one.

Charles de Champmeslé did not long survive his wife. A curious story attaches to his death. On the night of August 19-20, 1701, he dreamed that his dead mother and his wife appeared to him and beckoned him to follow them. Convinced that this dream was a warning of his approaching death, he went, early the following morning, to the church of the Cordeliers, and, handing the sacristan a thirty-sol piece, requested him to have two Requiem Masses said for the souls of his departed relatives. Then, as the monk was about to return him the change—the fee for a Mass was ten sols—the actor exclaimed: "Keep the balance and say a third Mass for me; I will stay and listen to it." On leaving the church, Champmeslé made his way

to a tavern adjoining the Comédie-Française, and sat down on a bench by the door, where he remained for some time, deep in thought. Presently he entered the theatre and walked about the *foyer*, muttering to himself the old proverb: "*Adieu, paniers! vendanges sont faites*" ("Farewell, baskets! the grapes are gathered"). He repeated this so often, and his manner appeared so strange, that his colleagues feared his mind had suddenly become affected. But, after a while, he recovered his usual cheerfulness, and invited his brother-in-law, Nicolas Desmares, and several others to dine with him at the tavern, in order to settle some dispute which had arisen between two of them. Scarcely, however, had they reached the door, than Champmeslé staggered, put his hands to his forehead, and fell, face downwards, on the floor. When his friends raised him up, he was dead.

III

ADRIENNE LECOUVREUR



### III

#### ADRIENNE LECOUVREUR

ALTHOUGH not the greatest, Adrienne Lecouvreur is perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most sympathetic, figure in the history of the French stage. She was the first actress to enjoy not only renown in the theatre, but consideration in society; she was beloved by the greatest soldier of her time; she was on terms of the closest friendship with the greatest poet, and inspired him to a most touching elegy; while the terrible suspicion attaching to her death and the deplorable scandal connected with her burial have invested her with a halo of romance. She seems, moreover, to possess an attraction for French writers which is shared by no other actress. She has found a well-informed contemporary biographer in the dramatist d'Allainval; Sainte-Beuve has given her a place in his *Lundis*, and Michelet one in his *Histoire de France*; Lemontey pronounced an eloquent *éloge* of her before the Academy; Régnier has allotted her a chapter in his *Souvenirs et études du théâtre*, and M. Larroumet has consecrated to her a fine study in his *Études de littérature et d'art*. Finally, she has been made the subject of a famous tragedy,<sup>1</sup> in which the heroine was impersonated by the greatest French actress of the nineteenth century, Rachel.

<sup>1</sup> *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, by Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé, first represented at the Théâtre de la République, April 1849.

Within recent years, interest in Adrienne Lecouvreur has been greatly stimulated owing to the publication by M. Georges Monval, the learned archivist of the Comédie-Française, of a collection of the actress's letters, preceded by an admirable biography, containing much information about the early part of her theatrical career, of which, up to that time, little or nothing was known. These letters, besides affording us a valuable insight into Adrienne's character, contain, in the opinion of eminent French critics, some truly exquisite pages, which entitle the writer to a place beside the Caylus, the Staals, the Aïssés, and other mistresses of the language of her time.

Adrienne Lecouvreur was born on April 5, 1692, at Damery, a little town of Champagne, overlooking the smiling valley of the Marne. Her father was a journeyman hatter, named Robert Couvreur;<sup>1</sup> her mother's name was Marie Bouty. Soon after Adrienne was born, her parents removed to Fismes, between Rheims and Soissons, and, about the year 1702, migrated to Paris, where they resided in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain-des-Prés, close to the Comédie-Française, the little girl being sent to the Couvent des Filles de l'Instruction Chrétienne, Rue du Gindre, one of the convents at which a certain number of poor children received a free education.

Adrienne appears to have had a very unhappy childhood. In a letter in verse which she addressed, many years later, to her faithful friend d'Argental, she declares that a divinity "furious and jealous" seated

<sup>1</sup> It was only when she became an actress that Adrienne prefaced her patronymic by the article "*Le*," in order to give it a more artistic sound. For a long time she wrote her name as two words.



herself near her cradle and controlled her destiny from her earliest years. In the "ruin" where she was born,—

" Residaient le misère et l'aigreur,  
L'emportement, la grossière fureur."

This last statement was probably true enough, as her father was a man of the most violent temper, who, after leading his family a sad life, finally became insane and had to be sent to the *maison de santé* at Charleville. Here, Adrienne tells us, the unfortunate man distinguished himself by "setting fire to the four corners of his room, and concealing himself in the chimney, which he had previously stopped up with the coverlet of his bed." His intention apparently was to make his escape amid the confusion which would follow the discovery of the fire, but, in the result, he was nearly burned to death. In spite of all she seems to have suffered at her father's hands, Adrienne never ceased to love him, and saw in this calamity "the chief of all her misfortunes."

When Adrienne was thirteen, a chance circumstance revealed her vocation for the theatre. She and some other children of her quarter took it into their heads to perform some plays for their own amusement, and met to rehearse at a grocer's shop in the Rue Ferou. The young people had the hardihood to attempt *Polyeucte*, Adrienne playing Pauline, one of the most touching of the great Corneille's heroines, and reciting the famous dramatist's verses with a fire and pathos which eclipsed Mlle. Duclos herself.

The news of their rehearsals reached the ears of a certain Madame du Gué, the wife of a President of the Parliament of Paris and a great patroness of the drama.

Madame la Présidente invited the little players to give a representation in the courtyard of her hôtel in the Rue Garancière, where she had a stage erected, and asked a large and distinguished company to witness the performance. Struck by the novelty of the entertainment, a great many people came who had not been invited, and, despite the efforts of eight tall Swiss, the door was forced, and when the curtain—or whatever did duty for it—rose, the courtyard, large as it was, was inconveniently crowded.

It had been arranged that the performance should consist of Pierre Corneille's famous tragedy, to be followed by a lively little play, in one act, and in verse, called *Le Deuil*, the joint work of Hauteroche and Thomas Corneille. In those days, we may observe, a tragedy was almost invariably followed by a comedy, the idea presumably being to dissipate the sad impressions produced by the former, and send the audience home in good spirits.

In default of a costume suitable to the period in which the action of *Polyeucte* passes, Adrienne had borrowed a gown of fashionable make from Madame du Gué's waiting-woman, which, unfortunately, was very much too large for her. But the little actress's talent triumphed over sartorial disadvantages, and her impersonation of the faithful wife of Polyeucte struggling against the memory of her first love was perfectly extraordinary for one of her age. "She charmed every one by a quite novel style of recitation, so natural and so true that it was the unanimous opinion that she had but a step to take to become the greatest actress ever seen upon the French stage."

Adrienne's efforts were ably seconded by a lad

named Menou, who played Sévère, and entered so thoroughly into the spirit of his rôle that, as he uttered the words: "*Soutiens-moi, ce coup de foudre est grand!*" he fell to the ground in a swoon, and had to be carried away and bled. After which, he pluckily returned and finished his part.

*Polyeucte* concluded, the little actors were about to begin their performance of *Le Deuil*, and every one was looking forward to see whether Adrienne would shape as well in comedy as she had in tragedy, when the archers of the Lieutenant of Police suddenly appeared on the scene. The members of the Comédie-Française had got wind of this entertainment, composed of two pieces from their own répertoire; and, indeed, several of them had assisted at it. The popularity of the national theatre was just then much weakened by the rivalry of the Opera and the unlicensed playhouses of the fairs in the neighbourhood of Paris, and they feared that by tolerating such performances as the present one their receipts would be still further diminished. They accordingly sent a deputation to d'Argenson, begging him to uphold the exclusive privileges conferred upon the Comédie-Française at its foundation, and to nip the enterprise of their youthful competitors in the bud.

The police informed Madame du Gué that they had come with orders from their chief to arrest the little players. But that good lady begged the *exempt* in charge for a short respite, and despatched a messenger to d'Argenson, who consented to pardon the delinquents, on condition that the performances should cease. Madame la Présidente's guests, accordingly, were disappointed of their comedy; but it was performed none the less, for the Grand Prieur de Vendôme, head of the

Order of Malta, learning of what had occurred, invited Adrienne and her comrades to the Temple, which was outside the ordinary jurisdiction of the police; and here they gave several performances, in which the little girl confirmed the great impression she had made at Madame du Gué's. "After which," says d'Allainval, "the party was entirely disbanded."

Adrienne had an aunt, a laundress, who numbered among her customers an actor named Le Grand, who had recently been admitted a *sociétaire* of the Comédie-Française, and was in the habit of increasing his professional income by training pupils for the stage. Le Grand was an amusing character. The son of a surgeon-major of the Invalides, he had received a fair education, and, after serving his apprenticeship in the provinces, had left France to accept an engagement at the Polish Court, where he had remained for some years. He seems to have owed his admission to the Comédie-Française to the patronage of no less a person than the Grand Dauphin himself, for, though an excellent teacher, he was an actor of but moderate ability, and was, moreover, so singularly ill-favoured that for some time he could not appear on the stage without being exposed to bursts of derisive laughter. His ready wit and imperturbable good-humour, however, eventually gained him the favour of the public. One night when he was being unmercifully chaffed by the pit, he came to the front of the stage, and coolly addressed his persecutors as follows: "Gentlemen, it will be easier for you to accustom yourselves to my face than for me to change it."

From that moment, his popularity was assured, but, to the last, his ungainly figure and comical face proved

a source of merriment to the less seriously disposed patrons of the theatre, especially when he happened to be undertaking an heroic part.

Le Grand's forte lay in the writing rather than the acting of plays. In this he was very successful, for, like Dancourt, he possessed the happy knack of giving dramatic form to the topics of the hour. Thus when, in October 1721, the notorious robber Cartouche was awaiting his trial, Le Grand made him the central figure of a comedy, called *Cartouche, ou les Voleurs*, and paid several visits to the Châtelet to study and converse with the prisoner. The play, as might be expected, drew crowded houses, and the grateful author sent Cartouche a hundred crowns as his share of the profits. But that worthy, whose vanity had at first been flattered by the idea of figuring as the hero of a play, now complained that the piece might prejudice his case, and, after the thirteenth performance, it was stopped by order of the Lieutenant of Police. Le Grand's best play was his *Roi de Cocagne*, a farcical comedy with interludes by Jean Baptiste Quinault, which had a great vogue, and is highly spoken of by August Wilhelm von Schlegel in his "Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature."

Proud of her little niece's talent, Adrienne's aunt mentioned her to Le Grand, who, after hearing the girl recite, at once perceived the great future which lay before her, and "decided to become her second master, Nature having been her first." He accordingly took her to live with him,<sup>1</sup> gave her lessons, and found her opportunities for acting in several amateur companies.

<sup>1</sup> Several writers have stated that she was his mistress, but this is incorrect. It was her cousin, the laundress's daughter, who occupied that position.

Finally he persuaded Robert Couvreur, whose financial affairs had reached a very parlous state, to allow his daughter to make the stage her profession.

Knowing, from his own experience, that the provinces were the best school and the nursery for the Comédie-Française, Le Grand recommended Adrienne to an old colleague of his, a Mlle. Fonpré, whose husband had formerly been manager of the Brussels theatre, and who had just obtained from the magistrates of Lille a three years' monopoly of dramatic performances in that town. Before her the girl recited some scenes from the *Cid*, which so delighted Mlle. Fonpré that she engaged her on the spot, and gave her permission to bring her father with her to Flanders.

Then began for Adrienne the life of a provincial actress, which, if it had somewhat improved since the days of the Illustre Théâtre, was still very far from being a bed of roses. "Mixture of hard work and of compulsory pleasure," says M. Larroumet, "with the companionships of the *coulisses*, the persistent attentions of young men of fashion and garrison officers, the errors of sentiment and conduct which were the consequence, and the repentance and disgust which followed, it was the most miserable and most trying to which a refined nature could submit."<sup>1</sup>

For ten years, that is to say, from 1706 to 1717, Adrienne exploited Flanders, Lorraine, and Alsace, now accepting a lengthy engagement at some important theatre, now journeying with some travelling company from town to town, acquiring in this rude apprenticeship a thorough knowledge of her art and a particularly cruel experience of life.

<sup>1</sup> *Études de littérature et d'art : Adrienne Lecouvreur*, p. 124.

At Lille, where she appears to have remained for about three years, dramatic performances were during several weeks carried on to the accompaniment of the cannon of a besieging army, first, under the Duke of Marlborough, and, afterwards, under Prince Eugène, to whom the citadel surrendered on October 28, 1708. On one occasion, a shell exploded within a few paces of the theatre, notwithstanding which the performances were as well attended as in time of peace.

After leaving Lille, Adrienne accepted an engagement as "leading lady" at the theatre at Lunéville, and she is also believed to have played at Metz, Nancy, and Verdun. Finally, early in the year 1711, we find her occupying a similar position at the Strasburg theatre, one of the finest houses to be met with out of Paris, with a salary of two thousand livres, a considerable sum for those days; and here she seems to have remained until the spring of 1717, when she returned to Paris to make her *début* at the Comédie-Française.

The portrait of Adrienne Lecouvreur was painted by several of the leading artists of her time: Charles Coypel, Fontaine, H. de Troy *le père*, Jean Baptiste Van Loo, and, it is believed, Nattier. None of these portraits, unfortunately, have come down to us, though the works of the two first painters are well known through the engravings of Drevet and Schmidt.

In regard to the merits of the two portraits, there seems to be considerable difference of opinion. Michelet, in his *Histoire de France*, speaks with enthusiasm of the painting by Coypel, reproduced in this volume, in which Adrienne is represented as Cornélie in *La Mort de Pompée*, weeping over the urn of her husband, which she holds clasped to her breast. "She must have exercised a terrible

power over hearts, to have been able to transform beasts into men, to have caused the feeble and mediocre Coypel to paint such a portrait. An inspired artist of our time, our first sculptor, Pr  ault, told me that he knew not a word of the history of Mlle. Lecouvreur when he saw this engraving. He was very affected by it, enraptured, and he seized upon it greedily. . . . It is more than a work of art, it is, as it were, a dream of grief. Those heavenly eyes, suffused with sublime tears, the gesture of those arms clasping the funeral urn, the grief expressed by that countenance, the silent accusation which that whole figure brings against destiny, all make of this picture a unique work, an honour alike to painter and model."

M. Larroumet agrees with Michelet: "I, for my part, am of opinion that if Charles Coypel, as a rule an artist of but moderate ability, invented the pose of this portrait, he had, by chance, an inspiration of genius, and that, if he only borrowed it from the actress, she possessed that innate sense of attitude which we admire in our own day (1892), in M. Mounet-Sully and Madame Sarah Bernhardt, and which alone would have sufficed to make of them great actors." M. Larroumet declares the portrait to possess "the incontestable merit of being a superb work of art," and greatly prefers it to the one by Fontaine, which shows us the actress "*en robe de chambre*," with her hair dressed in the fashion of the day. In the latter he can see only a "*tableau d'apparat*" of but little merit.

On the other hand, R  gnier, M. Maurice Pal  ologue, and M. Georges Monval, to the last of whom we owe the publication of Adrienne's correspondence, give the preference to Fontaine's work. "It is a truer, a more human, a more lifelike, a more familiar Adrienne,"



remarks M. Monval, who stigmatises the portrait by Coypel as "a fantastic and studied picture, a *tête d'étude*, a banal figure, under which one might equally well inscribe the name of Magdalene repentant, or of Sophie Arnould."

For ourselves, while on the whole inclined to endorse the high opinion which Michelet and M. Larroumet have formed of Coypel's portrait, we cannot but think that the latter has unduly depreciated that by Fontaine, which appears to us both pleasing and natural.

However that may be, the two portraits, in all essential respects, are far from dissimilar, and as they accord well with the descriptions of the actress given by contemporary writers, we see no reason to doubt the fidelity of either. In both we find a high forehead, fine eyes, a slightly aquiline nose, a well-shaped mouth, with the rather prominent lower lip which recalls the portraits of princesses of the House of Austria, and a rounded chin; in a word, the features of a very pretty woman.

In default of portraits painted or engraved, Adrienne's beauty would be amply attested by her contemporaries. Not that the testimony in her favour is altogether unanimous, as M. Paléologue rather boldly asserts; to expect unanimity in regard to the appearance of a celebrated actress, whose triumphs must of necessity arouse envy and jealousy in many quarters, would be as unreasonable as to look for a general appreciation of her dramatic talent. But the number of those who decline to admit her attractiveness is very small, and not above suspicion of prejudice, while the evidence to the contrary is abundant and authoritative. "Without being tall," wrote, in 1719, the author of *Les Lettres historiques sur tous les spectacles de Paris*, "she is very

well made, and has an air of distinction, which prepossesses one in her favour; no one in the world has more charms. Her eyes speak as much as her mouth, and often supply the place of her voice. In short, I cannot do better than compare her to a miniature, since she has agreeableness, finesse, and delicacy."

The *Mercure* confirms this portrait: "Mlle. Lecouvreur was about the middle height and admirably formed, with a noble and confident air, a well-poised head and shapely shoulders, eyes full of fire, a pretty mouth, a slightly aquiline nose, and very pleasing manners; although not plump, her face was somewhat full, with features admirably adapted to express sorrow, joy, tenderness, fear, and pity."<sup>1</sup>

Nature, besides endowing Adrienne with beauty, had given her an exceedingly susceptible heart. Her letters, published some years ago by M. Georges Monval, though, with one or two exceptions, none of them can be said to come within the category of love-letters, reveal an ardent and imperious need of loving and being loved. "*Que faire au monde sans aimer?*" she writes to one of her friends; and these words might very well have been taken as her motto.

With her, however, love was very far from being the consuming fire it is with so many of her sex; she was of the race of tender, not of passionate lovers; of the race, too, of those who, scorning the lighter forms of gallantry, and yet unable to preserve their virtue, are so often destined to bitter disappointment, disillusion, and remorse. "Relative of the Monimes, the Bérénices, the La Vallières, and the Aïssés," says M. Paléologue, in his

<sup>1</sup> *Le Mercure de France*, March 1730.

fine study of the actress, "she has their melting tears, their touching grace, and their voluptuous modesty. But her true originality among the women of her time lay in the conception that she formed of love. We know the singular change that this sentiment had undergone beneath the dissolving influence of the morals of the Regency; all that had made up to that time for the nobility and poetry of passion had fallen beneath the blows of the reigning philosophy and the persiflage of the salons. In this transformation the woman had lost more than the man. She had been taught that modesty and fidelity were grandiloquent words devoid of meaning, and, freeing herself from all romantic illusion, and clinging only to the positif and agreeable in her amorous intrigues, she displayed everywhere a cynical libertinism.

"It was the honour of Adrienne to resist this contagion. The gift of her person was always a pledge of the heart. She loved not by caprice, not by vanity, but by a moral inclination, with an ardour, a conscientiousness, and a gravity profound."<sup>1</sup>

The first of the actress's adorers was the Baron D——, a young officer of the Régiment de Picardie, which formed part of the garrison of Lille. Of him we know nothing, save that, after the *liaison* had lasted some months, he died suddenly, an event which occasioned his mistress such terrible grief that she is said to have seriously contemplated destroying herself. To the baron succeeded a certain Philippe Le Roy, "officer of the Duke of Lorraine," by whom, in 1710, Adrienne had a daughter, baptized as Élisabeth Adrienne. M. Le Roy, however, appears to have proved fickle, for, soon after—

<sup>1</sup> *Profil de Femmes : Adrienne Lecouvreur.*

wards, we hear of a third lover, a provincial actor named Clavel, brother of Mlle. Fonpré.

With Clavel Adrienne corresponded, and two of her letters to him have fortunately been preserved, the only love-letters of this woman who loved so much that have come down to us. It is much to be regretted that the rest of this correspondence has been lost, as they reveal the actress in a very favourable light: warm-hearted, sincere, loyal, and disinterested.

The first letter, written some time in the year 1710, is in reply to one from Clavel, which she has been impatiently awaiting:—

“I have at last received that letter so eagerly anticipated, and for which I have been astounding Notre Dame des Carmes with my prayers. I can assure thee, my dear friend, that I have had no rest since thy departure, both on account of my uneasiness at not receiving news of thee and of finding myself inconvenienced as I am. I hope to be better now, since I have reason to believe that thou lovest me still and that thou art well. Take care of thyself, I beg of thee, since thy health is as precious to me as my own. I shall be charmed to learn that thou art enjoying thyself, provided that I lose by it nothing of what is mine, and that thou dost not write to me less often. . . . Assuredly, I believe that thou hast a kind heart, and, consequently, art faithful to thy poor Lecouvreur, who loves thee more than herself. . . . I embrace thee with all the tenderness of my heart, and swear to thee a constancy proof against all things.”

From the second letter, which was written two years later, and which M. Larroumet declares to be “one of

the tenderest and most touching letters to be found in literature, real or imaginative, worthy of comparison with the famous letter of *Manon Lescaut*," it would appear that Clavel had promised to marry Adrienne, or, at least, given her reason to believe that such was his intention; and she refers to the matter with a frankness, a delicacy, and a forgetfulness of self rarely met with where personal interests are at stake:—

"I hardly know what I ought to think of your<sup>1</sup> neglect, at a time when everything ought to alarm me. Be always persuaded that I love you for yourself a hundred times more than on my own account. Time will prove to you, my dear Clavel, what I swear to you to-day. Entertain for me the sentiments that I shall entertain for you all my life, for all my ambition is bounded by that. With all the attachment that I have for you, I should be in despair if you did anything for me with repugnance. Reflect well that you are still master. Consider that I have nothing and that I owe a great deal, and that you will find greater advantages elsewhere. For my part, I have nothing, save youth and good will, but that does not adjust matters. I speak to you plainly, as you see, and I tell you frankly things which are able to make you think of me as one whom you ought to avoid. Here is a chance to take your own part. Have no consideration. Make no promise that you do not intend to keep; were it necessary for you to promise to hate me, it seems to me that it would be easier for me to bear than to find myself deceived. . . . I tell you again, my dear Clavel, that your interests are

<sup>1</sup> Note the change from the familiar and affectionate "*ton*" of the previous letter to the formal "*votre*."

dearer to me than my own. Follow the course which will be most pleasing to you. I know you to be of a disposition which will prompt you to behave generously and perhaps to surpass me; but yet once again reflect well. Act like the honest man that you are and follow your own inclination, without troubling about the possible consequences. I shall resign myself, by some means or other, as well as I can, whether I gain or lose you. If I have you, I shall have the sorrow of not rendering you as happy as I should wish; my own happiness will perhaps make me forget the pain. . . . If I lose you, I shall strive at least not to do so entirely, and I shall still retain some place in your esteem. If you are happy, I shall have the pleasure of knowing that I have not prevented it; or, if you are not, I, at any rate, shall not be the cause, and I shall endeavour in some way to console myself."

The result of Clavel's reflections was that he came to the conclusion that marriage with a young woman who "had nothing and owed a great deal" might prove but an indifferent bargain for an ambitious young actor; and Adrienne, after a somewhat lengthy period of solitude, accepted the protection of Comte François de Klinglin, son of the *préteur royal*, or first magistrate, of Strasburg. To him, at the beginning of the year 1717, she bore a second daughter, Catherine Françoise Ursule; but the ill-fortune which had attended her previous *liaisons* still pursued her, for, almost immediately after this event, her lover abandoned her, in order to contract a wealthy marriage, to which he had been long urged by his family.

The marriage of the father of her child threw poor

Adrienne into the depths of despair. Too proud to reproach him with his perfidy, and yet too sensitive to remain to witness its consummation, she determined to leave the city, which must henceforth have for her such painful associations, and, having obtained permission to make her *début* at the Comédie-Française, at the close of the theatrical year, she set out for Paris. Her two children she left at Strasburg, where she had them educated with great care, and on her death, in 1730, made ample provision for them. The elder, daughter of Philippe Le Roy, afterwards married the musician Francœur the younger, who, in 1757, was appointed director of the Opera; the younger, daughter of the faithless Klinglin, became the wife of a M. Daudet (or Dauvet), a magistrate at Strasburg.

It was on May 14, 1717, that Adrienne made her first appearance before the Parisian public, in the title-part in the *Électre* of Crébillon, and as Angélique in *George Dandin*—that is to say, in both tragedy and comedy. Notwithstanding the fact that the Czar, Peter the Great, then on a visit to Paris, was to be present at the Opera that evening, the house was crowded, for the *débutante* had brought a great reputation with her from the provinces, while not a few playgoers remembered her performances when a child at Madame du Gué's and in the Temple. The expectations of the public were not disappointed. "Her success was so prodigious," writes d'Allainval, "that it was remarked that she had begun as great actresses usually finish"; and a perfect storm of enthusiasm followed the fall of the curtain.

Nor did the heroine of the evening fail to confirm

the advantage she had gained. A few days later, she gave a masterly rendering of the rôle of Monime in Racine's *Mithridate*, which will be remembered as one of Mlle. de Champmeslé's most brilliant creations, speedily followed by other triumphs as Bérénice, Irené in *Andronic*, Alcmène in *Amphitryon*, and Pauline in *Polyeucte*; and, on June 20, a vacancy having in the meanwhile arisen, she was received into the company and allotted a *demi-part*.

For thirteen years, that is to say until her death, on March 20, 1730, Adrienne reigned the almost unquestioned queen of the Comédie-Française, passing from triumph to triumph, associating her name with a great variety of characters in tragedy, and attaining a popularity with the playgoing public such as no actress had ever before enjoyed. "A lofty soul, great enthusiasm, constant study, a passionate love for her art," says Sainte-Beuve, "all combined to make of her that ideal of a great *tragédienne*, which until that time does not appear to have been realised to this degree. Mlle. Duclos was only a representative of the declamatory school, and if Mlle. Desmares and the Champmeslé had had great and splendid parts, they certainly never attained to the all-round perfection of Adrienne Lecouvreur. When the latter appeared, she had no other model than her own taste, and she created."<sup>1</sup>

As the French theatre had been founded in imitation of the ancients, without much regard for the difference of manners, in the same way, its dramatic declamation was ruled by obscure traditions, independently of the difference in languages. When at the theatre of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the art had hardly freed itself from

<sup>1</sup> *Causeries du Lundi*, I. 161.



its first awkwardness, some erroneous ideas of the elocution of the Greeks and the stage system of the Romans made of the actor's delivery a kind of measured chant. Favoured by the construction of the verses of the great seventeenth century dramatists and the brilliant successes of Mlle. de Champmeslé, this monotonous chant passed from the Rue Mauconseil to the Comédie-Française, where, at the time of Adrienne's appearance, it had become so firmly established that to the great majority of the company and a large number of their patrons any revolt against its sway seemed something like sacrilege. So long as Baron had remained on the stage some check had been imposed on this deplorable custom, for Baron, educated in the school of Molière, a strenuous advocate of naturalness, had remained faithful to the traditions of the Palais-Royal. But his abrupt retirement, in 1696, in the flower of his age, left the adherents of the rival school in undisputed possession of the field, and for more than twenty years nothing occurred to interfere with the reign of inflated declamation, which was carried by the successors of Mlle. de Champmeslé to lengths which provoked the ridicule and disgust of foreign visitors.<sup>1</sup>

Adrienne's phenomenal success was, in a great measure, due to the fact that she had the courage and good sense to break with the old traditions of the theatre, and abandon this stilted and artificial style of elocution for simpler and more natural modes of speech. "The charming Lecouvreur," wrote the Italian actor Riccoboni, the *jeune premier* of the Comédie-Italienne, in his didactic poem, *Dell' arte rappresentativa*, "is the only one who does not follow the road along which all her comrades run at full speed. If she happens to weep or complain

<sup>1</sup> Lemontey, *Notice sur Adrienne Lecouvreur*.

without terrifying us, as the others do by their bawlings, she touches the heart so profoundly, that we become affected with her."<sup>1</sup>

This natural style of delivery seems to have been originally imposed upon Adrienne by her physique, which was more delicate than vigorous. Her voice, though singularly pleasing, was not remarkable for extent and power, like Mlle. de Champmeslé's, but she used it with such consummate skill as to vary its modulations according to the sentiments she desired to express. "Although her voice is very weak," says the author of the *Lettres historiques*, "she pleased the public at first, and continues to please it; because it finds in her a novel style, natural and the more agreeable, in that she has studied how to control it and to proportion it to her strength; and thus one might say that the weakness of her chest has contributed to this kind of perfection." The *Mercure*, of March 1730, confirms the anonymous writer: "She had not many tones in her voice, but she knew how to lend to them infinite variety." Moreover, she seems to have possessed the rare gift of clearness of pronunciation, "the orthography of the actor's art," and seldom indeed had so pure and distinct a delivery been heard upon the stage.

For this last qualification Adrienne was indebted to the counsels of César du Marsais, the grammarian-philosopher, as, when she first appeared on the stage of the Comédie-Française, her pronunciation was far from perfect; she understood the true meaning of the words of her parts, but delivered them in a way which considerably discounted their value, and thus, according to Régnier, touched the hearts, and irritated the ears of

<sup>1</sup> Cited by M. Georges Monval, *Lettres d'Adrienne Lecouvreur*.

the more fastidious critics at one and the same time. D'Allainval relates that on the evening of her *début*, while the theatre was ringing with the applause of the delighted audience, an elderly man, seated at the back of a box, refrained from joining in the general enthusiasm, and contented himself with remarking from time to time, in a low tone, "*Bon, cela!*" His behaviour was much commented upon by those who sat near him, and duly reported to Adrienne, who, on learning that it was Du Marsais, became curious to learn the reason of the qualified approval of one who appeared to be a critic of some discernment, and accordingly sent him a very courteous note inviting him to dine with her *tête-à-tête*.

Du Marsais came, but, before sitting down to table, he begged the actress to do him the favour of reciting a tirade from one of her favourite rôles. Adrienne readily consented, but was not a little surprised at only obtaining for her trouble an occasional "*Bon, cela.*" Mortified by her guest's comparative indifference to her talents, she inquired in what she had failed to please him. "*Mademoiselle,*" replied Du Marsais, "so far as my judgment goes, no actress has ever given promise of greater talents than yours, and, in order to eclipse probably all your predecessors, I will venture to promise that all that is required on your part is to give to each word the exact emphasis necessary to express its meaning."

Adrienne begged the grammarian not to be sparing of his advice, and, following it religiously, soon succeeded in correcting her faulty pronunciation.

It must not be supposed that Adrienne was able to effect the overthrow of a style of elocution which had reigned almost unchallenged since the foundation of the

Comédie-Française without encountering strenuous and, in some cases, acrimonious opposition from its many champions. Mesdemoiselles Duclos and Desmares, prompted, no doubt, as much by jealousy of the newcomer as by loyalty to the traditions in which they had been trained, were particularly bitter in their resistance, and, supported by the Quinault coterie,<sup>1</sup> did not confine themselves to legitimate protests or to sustaining against her promising *débutantes*, but subjected the young actress to a variety of petty persecutions. Régnier, in his *Souvenirs et études du théâtre*, cites a number of extracts from the registers of the Comédie, from which it appears that a favourite practice of Adrienne's enemies was to cause her to be fined on all kinds of pretexts: for being late for rehearsal, for not wearing the costume prescribed for her part, and so forth. On one occasion, a kind colleague inquired if she were aware that the anagram of her name was *Couleuvre* (viper); and during the run of Voltaire's *Hérode and Mariamne*, Mlle. de Seine, who, two years later, became the wife of Quinault-Dufresne, carried her insolence so far that the Gentlemen of the Chamber, within whose jurisdiction the theatre lay, were obliged to interfere, and direct the *semainiers*, as a number of players who governed the theatre in rotation were called, "to deduct the sum of one hundred livres from the share of Mlle. de Seine, for unseemly behaviour towards Mlle. Lecouvreur, and to give her warning that she would be dismissed from the troupe in the event of a repetition of the offence."

<sup>1</sup> There were, at this period, four members of the Quinault family in the troupe of the Comédie-Française: two brothers, Jean Baptiste Quinault and Abraham Alexis Quinault-Dufresne, and two sisters, Marie Anne Quinault and Jeanne Françoise Quinault.

The climax of the campaign against Adrienne had, it seems, been reached some time before this incident. In September 1723, Philippe Poisson, a retired member of the Comédie-Française, submitted to the company, under a *nom de guerre*, a comedy in one act, entitled *l'Actrice nouvelle*, which was nothing less than a personal satire on Adrienne, her art, and her private life. The play, in Adrienne's absence, was read to the assembled troupe by the elder Quinault, who, in the speeches assigned to the heroine, imitated the voice and gestures of the *tragédienne* so cleverly as to send the lady's enemies into convulsions of merriment. It was at once resolved to accept the play, and Mlle. Duclos and her friends doubtless indulged in much gleeful anticipation as to what their rival's feelings would be when she found herself publicly caricatured before her admirers in the boxes and pit. Unfortunately for the success of this malicious scheme, the secret, though well kept, leaked out, and Adrienne lost no time in bringing the matter to the notice of the authorities, who issued an order forbidding the production of *l'Actrice nouvelle*.

That Adrienne should have triumphed so completely as she did over tradition and jealousy was due to two causes. In the first place, she succeeded in securing the immediate, and almost unanimous, approbation of the playgoing public, who, when afforded an opportunity of comparing the rival methods of elocution, pronounced without hesitation, and in no uncertain way, in favour of the innovation. The second was the unexpected intervention of Baron, who, in April 1720, at the age of sixty-seven, suddenly resolved to return to the scene of his many triumphs, and, delighted to find that an actress

had arisen who shared his own views on the subject of elocution, lent her all the encouragement and support in his power. Aided by this invaluable ally, Adrienne succeeded in effecting a veritable revolution; the "bawlings" which had so disgusted the Italian actor Riccoboni were heard no more, the monotonous chant was banished, and in its place reigned "a declamation simple, noble, and natural."<sup>1</sup>

The excellence of Adrienne's delivery was equalled, if not surpassed, by her really wonderful by-play. Like Mlle. Molière, she possessed in a very marked degree the difficult art of listening, the extreme mobility of her features enabling her to assume at will every shade of emotion and exhibit successively the different impressions which the words addressed to her would naturally produce. "Perhaps no one," observes the *Mercur*, "has ever so well understood the art of silent scenes, that is to say, listened so well and so well expressed the sense of the words uttered by the actor who was on the stage with her; while Dumas d'Aigueberre tells us that "her attitudes were noble and natural, that she invested the movements of her arms with inimitable grace, and that her eyes announced what she was about to say." She possessed, too, a very rare gift—the art of concealing art, of entirely subordinating the interpreter to the work. The dramatist Collé, a critic by no means easy to please, it may be remarked, declares that "her treatment of every detail of a rôle was perfect; and, in this way, caused one to forget the actress; one saw only the personage whom she happened to be representing." Yet another trait, and one which provoked general admiration, was the rapidity and completeness with

<sup>1</sup> *Mercur de France*, March 1730.

which she passed from one state of mind to its exact opposite, from profound grief to joyous gaiety, from frenzied anger to moving tenderness. "When in the rôle of Elisabeth,"<sup>1</sup> says the *Mercur*, "she learned of the love of the Comte d'Essex for the Duchess d'Irton; when, in fact, she was delivered to the greatest scorn which a woman, and, in particular, a queen, can endure, with what sensibility did she descend from the height of pride to the extreme of the greatest tenderness, even so far as to co-operate with the duchess, in order to save the count."

Brilliant *tragédienne* though Adrienne undoubtedly was, in scenes which called for an unusual display of passion, her acting appears to have left a good deal to be desired, a circumstance probably attributable to her want of physical strength. According to Collé, she "excelled in scenes where the greatest finesse was needed rather than those which required strength." Her acting, too, was somewhat uneven; to see her at her best, Dumas d'Aiguebierre tells us, "it was necessary for her to be animated either by some part which pleased her or by some object of interest." In fact, though no one had ever given such magnificent renderings of the rôles of Monime and Bérénice, she lacked the courage and determination which had enabled Mlle. de Champmeslé to make a success out of the most mediocre part. The receipts of the Comédie-Française during the early years of its existence would, we are inclined to think, have been much less satisfactory had it fallen to Adrienne Lecouvreur's lot to interpret the insipid heroines of Pradon and Boyer.

The principal rôles created by Adrienne in tragedy

<sup>1</sup> In Thomas Corneille's tragedy, *Le Comte d'Essex*.

were Cléopâtre in the *Antiochus et Cléopâtre* of Deschamps, Antigone in the *Machabées* of La Motte, Zarès in *Esther*, Nitetis in Danchet's play of that name, Constance in La Motte's *Inès de Castro*, and the title-part in Voltaire's *Mariamne*.

The last-named play failed, owing to one of those little incidents so common to the French stage of that day. At the moment when Mariamne, condemned to death by poison, was on the point of raising the fatal cup to her lips, a wag in the pit cried out, "*La Reine boit*," a sally which was followed by such merriment that the indignant actors declined to finish the play. Rewritten by Voltaire, who this time prudently made the death of the heroine take place off the stage, it reappeared a year later, under the title of *Hérode et Mariamne*, when it had twenty-eight representations, and when played before the Court at Fontainebleau, moved the young Queen, Marie Leczinska, to tears.

It was during the run of *Mariamne*, in its revised form, that the quarrel between Voltaire and the Chevalier de Rohan, second son of the Duc de Rohan-Chabot, took place. The poet and the chevalier were with several other persons in Adrienne's dressing-room at the theatre; Voltaire was giving the company the benefit of his views on dramatic art or some other subject. "Who is that young man who talks so loud?" cried Rohan, who was in love with Adrienne and very probably jealous of the friendship existing between her and the poet. "He is one who does not carry about a great name, but earns respect for the name he has," was the retort. The chevalier raised his cane threateningly; Voltaire laid his hand upon his sword; Adrienne promptly sank down in a swoon, or, perhaps, since she was an actress,



in a pretended swoon; both gentlemen hastened to her assistance, and the quarrel ceased. How, a few days later, Rohan caused Voltaire to be cudgelled by his lackeys; how the enraged poet, after taking a course of fencing lessons, challenged his enemy to a duel, and how, in consequence, he was packed off to the Bastille, for the second time, are incidents too well known to require relation here.<sup>1</sup>

In comedy Adrienne appears to have fallen very far short of the high standard she attained as a *tragédienne*. "She only played and shone in a few rôles," says the *Mercure*. The registers of the Comédie-Française show that she attempted Célimène, "the touchstone of *grandes coquettes*," and Elmire in *Tartuffe*; but, as she only figures nine times in the former character and four times in the latter, we may presume that her rendering of them could not have been more than moderately successful. She gave, however, a very pleasing interpretation of Alcmène in *Amphitryon*, and Hortense in *Le Florentin*, in which character she made her last appearance on the stage, and, as Angélique, had a large share in the success of Piron's *Fils ingrats*; while to her acting in the part of the heroine, Voltaire was much indebted for the favourable reception accorded to his little comedy *l'Indiscret*. On the other hand, as the Marquise, in Marivaux's *Surprise de l'amour*, she seems to have come very near to an absolute failure, the critics accusing her of giving to what the author intended to be a gay and frivolous character an air of solemnity and dignity more befitting a tragedy queen.

Several writers have asserted that Adrienne, not

<sup>1</sup> According to another version of this affair, it was the challenge, and not the quarrel, which took place in Adrienne's dressing-room.

content with introducing a more natural mode of enunciation, was the pioneer of reform in theatrical costume. This is only partially true. Adrienne possessed excellent taste in dress, and was keenly alive to the absurdity of clothing the heroes and heroines of antiquity in the costume of the eighteenth century. But her attempts in the direction of archæological truth do not appear to have been very bold or to have met with much success; and the first important transformation in this respect was due to the efforts of Mlle. Clairon and Lekain. She played, however, Queen Elizabeth, in the *Comte d'Essex*, "in an English Court costume decorated with the blue riband of the Garter," and the inventory of her wardrobe, published by M. Georges Monval, in his edition of her letters, comprise "*douze habits à la romaine*"—or what were believed to be such—of which two were of white damask, two of crimson velvet, one of yellow satin, one of blue velvet, two of white satin, and one of crimson damask, probably that worn by Cornélie in the *Mort de Pompée*. Several of these costumes were very richly wrought and realised prices varying from eight hundred to a thousand livres, equivalent, of course, to much larger sums in money of to-day. The full description of one of them may not be without interest: "Item, another costume *à la romaine* of cherry-coloured velvet, composed of a train trimmed with Spanish point and with bunches of flowers in the train; a petticoat of the same velvet trimmed with silver Spanish point; the body of the dress of the same material trimmed with silver Spanish point, and shoulder-knots likewise trimmed with Spanish point; silver fringes encircling the shoulder-knots; and two little *amadis*, also trimmed with silver Spanish point."

It is curious to note, remarks M. Larroumet, the different ideas of what constituted a correct classical costume which prevailed at various times on the French stage. Thus, from the beginning of the pseudo-classical revival in art down to the middle of the nineteenth century, the tendency was all towards simplicity, and Rachel delighted her audiences in severely simple robes sparsely embroidered with gold and silver. Then came the discovery that the ancients, so far from affecting the austerity in dress with which they had so long been credited, had had a weakness for rich stuffs and costly ornaments, with the result that the costumes of the *Phèdres* and *Athalies* of to-day bear a much closer resemblance to the satins and velvets of Adrienne Lecouvreur than the woollen gowns of Rachel.<sup>1</sup>

The jealousy with which Adrienne was regarded by her colleagues at the Comédie-Française was not due solely to her professional success; besides being idolised by the public, she had obtained for herself a social position which had never been accorded to any of her predecessors. At this period, actors and actresses still remained on the borders of society. If exceptionally handsome or talented, they were flattered and caressed by the *beau monde*, taken for mistresses, or lovers, or boon companions; but access to regular society was denied them. The extreme license of morals which characterised the Regency brought with it no change in this respect; and if, now and again, some *grande dame* chose to visit or receive a member of the theatrical profession, the interview almost invariably took place in private and often surreptitiously.

<sup>1</sup> *Études de littérature et d'art : Adrienne Lecouvreur*, p. 141.

That so rigid a rule should have been relaxed in favour of Adrienne Lecouvreur, and of her alone, is a very remarkable fact and a striking tribute to the charm which she must have exercised over her own as well as over the opposite sex. There can, however, be little doubt that a very great gulf divided her from her colleagues. Not only was she beautiful and fascinating, but well-read, well-mannered, modest, and unaffected, and a friend in whose discretion implicit reliance could be imposed. She numbered among her friends a princess of the blood, the Duchesse du Maine, the Duc and Duchesse de Gesvres, Madame de Pomponne, Madame de Fontaine-Martel, the wife of Président Berthier, the celebrated Marquise de Lambert, admission to whose very exclusive "Tuesdays and Wednesdays" conferred a sort of brevet of social distinction, d'Argental and Maurice de Saxe, of both of whom we shall have a good deal to say presently, the Duc de Richelieu, the Comte de Caylus, La Chalotais, and Pont-de-Veyle, not to speak of men of letters, like Du Marsais, Fontenelle, Voltaire, and Piron.

With all of these persons, and many others, Adrienne was not only on friendly but on intimate terms, dining and supping with them frequently and visiting them at their country-houses, and giving, in return, charming little suppers, before each of which, with singular tact, she invariably requested the guest of the evening to select those whom she desired to meet.

According to Titon du Tillet, it was Adrienne who introduced the custom of actresses reciting at private houses. "Mlle. Lecouvreur," says he, "who was in great request at the best houses in Paris and at the Court, did not refuse in the assemblies which she

attended to declaim some fine tirades in verse, and even whole scenes from tragedies, which delighted her hearers. It was a very rare thing for persons of her profession to recite verses outside the theatre, and I have hardly known any one, save Baron, who gave people this pleasure."

Unfortunately for Adrienne, her social duties, combined with the arduous work of her profession, seem to have imposed too great a tax upon her strength, and in her letters to her friends she complains constantly of the strain of this double life. The following letter, written in May 1728, probably to Maurice de Saxe, gives us an excellent insight into her character and also into the life of a "society" actress. Allowing for the difference in style, it might just as well have been written in the twentieth as in the eighteenth century:—

"I spend three parts of my time in doing that which displeases me; new acquaintances, whom, however, it is impossible to escape, so long as I remain tied as I am, preventing me from cultivating the old or from occupying myself at home as I should like to do. It is an established custom for them to sup or dine with me, because some duchesses have done me this honour. There are persons whose kindness and graciousness charm me, and they are sufficient for me, but I am unable to devote myself to them, because I am a public personage, and it is absolutely necessary to reply to all those who are desirous of making my acquaintance, or else be considered impertinent. However careful I am, I am continually offending people. If my poor health, which is delicate, as you know, obliges me to refuse or to fail some party of ladies whom I have never seen, and who

have no interest in me beyond curiosity: 'Assuredly,' says one, 'she has a marvellous opinion of her importance!' Another adds: 'It is because we are not titled!' If I happen to be serious, for one cannot be very gay with many people one does not know: 'Is this the girl who has so much wit?' says one of the company. 'Don't you see that she despises us,' says another, 'and that one must know Greek in order to please her?' 'She visits Madame de Lambert,' exclaims a third; 'does not that explain the mystery?' I am still full of spiteful speeches of this kind, and more occupied than ever in my desire to become free and to have no longer to pay court, save to those who really will entertain a kind feeling for me, and will satisfy my heart and my mind. My vanity does not find that numbers atone for merit in persons, and I have no desire to shine. To keep my lips closed and listen to good conversation, to find myself in the delightful society of clever and virtuous people, is a hundred times more pleasant to me than to be stunned by all the insipid praises which they lavish upon me right and left in many places to which I go. It is not that I am wanting in gratitude or in the wish to please, but I find that the approbation of fools is not flattering, and that it becomes burdensome when it has to be purchased by individual and repeated complaisances."

From the above letter, it will be seen that Adrienne's tastes lay in the direction of a retired and peaceful life in the midst of a small circle of chosen friends, and that the wearisome round of social pleasures possessed but few attractions for her. In her exquisitely furnished house in the Rue des Marais—the same in which Mlle. de Champmeslé and, after her, Racine had formerly lived,

and which, in later years, was to become the residence of Mlle. Clairon—she spent the greater part of her scanty leisure, her favourite occupations being reading and music. She possessed a small but excellent library, containing some four hundred volumes, dramatic literature and memoirs and historical works predominating. Among the former were complete editions of the plays of Molière and Racine; among the latter Échard's *Histoire Romaine*, Daniel's *Histoire de France*, *Les Révolutions d'Angleterre* by Père d'Orleans, and the *Mémoires* of Madame de Motteville.<sup>1</sup>

That Adrienne should have numbered among her friends of the opposite sex several who were desirous of establishing a closer relationship with the charming actress was, of course, only to be expected. Barbier, in his *Journal*, asserts that one Prungent, intendant of the Duchess of Brunswick, was her lover, and had "squandered with her the money of the princess"; while other contemporary writers mention in the same connection the celebrated Lord Peterborough, the Chevalier de Rohan, and Voltaire.

Voltaire had been one of the first to appreciate both the talents and personal qualities of Adrienne, and in a letter to Thiériot, written shortly after the actress's untimely death, he declares himself to have been "her admirer, her friend, her lover." The biographers of the lady are divided in opinion as to whether this last term is to be taken in its literal, or in its platonic and poetic sense; but whatever may have been the relations between the *tragédienne* and the writer, it is certain that Adrienne found in Voltaire one of the firmest and most devoted

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres d'Adrienne Lecouvreur*, by M. Georges Monval, p. 252.

of her friends, who is undoubtedly sincere when he reminds her

“De la pauvre amitié que son cœur a pour elle,”

and who remained tenderly attached to her to the last hour of her life.

However, even if Adrienne yielded in favour of a dramatic author to the customs of her profession, or, as Lemontey expresses it, was “bound to Voltaire by the ties of glory and of love which in the preceding century had united Racine and the Champmeslé,” it is improbable that either of the other persons mentioned were anything more than admirers. The actress’s early experiences of the tender passion had, as we have seen, been singularly bitter; the selfishness of man had inflicted upon her the most cruel of humiliations for a loving and sensitive woman, that of being cast aside like a broken toy when she had surrendered herself in the most absolute confidence, and she had come to Paris firmly resolved to remain henceforth mistress of her heart and her actions. The letters published by M. Monval show that, during the first three years of her residence in the capital, she replied to several declarations of love by offers of friendship, explaining her ideas on the subject with singular frankness.

“If I am unable to render you more happy,” she writes to one of her *soupirants*, “I am more grieved than you yourself. I reproach myself. I tell myself, without doubt, more than you can tell me; but I could not deceive you. Caprices do not agree with reason, and love is nothing else but a folly which I detest, and to which I shall strive hard not to surrender myself so long as I live.



You will understand it yet, and the severity with which I have treated you will serve then only to render you more happy. Permit me to approach the matter with you, and to offer you my counsels. Be my friend ; I am worthy of that, but choose for mistress one who possesses a heart quite untampered with ; who has not yet repented of that trust which renders everything so beautiful ; who has been neither betrayed nor deserted ; who believes you such as you are, and all men such as you. Let her be young and rather strong ; she will be the less sensitive. Finally, see that she gives to you as much constancy as I should have given, if I had never loved any one save you.”

Among the adorers whom Adrienne rejected, and whose friendship she nevertheless succeeded in retaining through life, was the Marquis de la Chalotais, whose famous quarrel with Madame du Barry's *protégé*, the Duc d'Aiguillon, convulsed all France during the last years of Louis XV. The future Advocate-General of the Parliament of Brittany was, at the time when he made Adrienne's acquaintance, a gay young abbé and a great frequenter of the Comédie-Française, where he paid assiduous court to its chief divinity, but without obtaining anything save her friendship and esteem. Having succeeded to the family title and become Advocate-General at Rennes, he continued to correspond with his former enchantress, and was in the habit of sending her a present every year. Only nine days before her death, Adrienne wrote him a charming letter, thanking him for his gift and assuring him of her lasting regard :—

“ When one has been acquainted with a person for ten or twelve years, and has a kind of attachment for him

which is proof against separation and ought not to injure any one, one may speak without restraint. I assure you, then, that I love you as much as I esteem you, that I pray for your happiness and that of all belonging to you, and I entreat you to retain for me remembrance and more."

In his letter, La Chalotais had expressed regret that it was impossible for him to take lessons in declamation from Adrienne; and the actress concludes by very modestly defining her own method of elocution, and giving her friend some very excellent advice on the subject:—

"You say that you would like me to teach you the art of declamation, of which you stand in need. You have then forgotten that I do not declaim. The simplicity of my acting is my one poor merit; but this simplicity, which chance has turned to my advantage, appears to me indispensable to a man in your profession. The first requisite is intelligence, and that you have; the next, to allow beneficent Nature to do her work. To speak with grace, nobility, and simplicity, and to reserve all your energies for the argument, are what you will say and do better than any man."

An admirer whom Adrienne had infinitely more difficulty in persuading to be content with friendship than La Chalotais was Voltaire's faithful ally, d'Argental. D'Argental, who was then a lad scarcely out of his teens, conceived for the actress a most violent passion, and, though the latter repeatedly assured him that friendship was all she had to bestow, for long refused to abandon hope.

In the meantime, his infatuation had become common knowledge, and his family, forgetting La Rochefoucauld's

maxim that absence, while extinguishing feeble passions, only adds fuel to great ones, sent him to England in the hope that separation might effect a cure. With the consent of his mother, Madame de Ferriol, Adrienne wrote him long and frequent letters, carefully avoiding, however, the forbidden topic, her object being to accustom him to regard her merely as a friend. But these epistles appear to have had a very different effect from the one intended by the writer ; the cure made no progress, and the young man's family, fearing that the actress was but simulating indifference in order to augment his passion to the point of offering her marriage, resolved to remove him altogether out of reach of his enchantress by banishing him to St. Domingo.

However, no such drastic measures were necessary, for Adrienne, learning of what was intended, lost no time in writing to the anxious mother a most charming letter, which had the effect of completely allaying her apprehensions on the young gentleman's behalf. As all the actress's biographers concur in pronouncing this letter to be the pearl of her correspondence, we need make no apology for transcribing it at length :—

“ PARIS, *March 22, 1721.*

“ Madame,—I cannot learn without being deeply pained of your anxiety and of the resolves with which this anxiety has inspired you. I might add that I have been not less grieved by learning that you blame my conduct ; but I write to you less to justify it than to protest that for the future, in all that concerns you, it shall be such as you may wish to prescribe. I had requested permission to see you last Tuesday, with the intention of speaking to you in confidence and of asking

you for your commands. But your reception of me destroyed my ardour, and I found myself only timid and sad. It is necessary, however, that you should be aware of my true sentiments, and, if you will permit me to add something further, that you should not disdain to listen to my very humble remonstrances, if you do not wish to lose your son.

“He is the most respectful youth and the most honest man that I have met in my life. You would admire him did he not belong to you. Once again, Madame, deign to co-operate with me in destroying a weakness which irritates you, and in which I have no part, whatever you may say. Do not show him either contempt or harshness. I would prefer to take upon myself all his hatred, in spite of the friendship, affection, and veneration that I entertain for him, than expose him to the least temptation which might cause him to fail in respect towards you. You are too interested in curing him not to strive earnestly to attain your object; but you are too much so to succeed in attaining it unaided, above all, when you endeavour to combat his inclination by the exercise of your authority, or by painting me in disadvantageous colours, whether true or not. His passion must indeed be an extraordinary one, since it has existed so long without the least hope, in the midst of disappointments, in spite of the journeys you have made him undertake, and during eight months’ residence in Paris, during which he never saw me, at least not at my house, and was unaware if I should ever receive him again. I conceived him to be cured, and, for that reason, consented to see him during my last illness. It is easy to believe that his society would afford me infinite pleasure, were it not for this unhappy passion,

which astonishes as much as it flatters me, but of which I decline to take advantage. You fear that, if he sees me, he will depart from his duty, and you carry this fear to such a point as to take violent resolutions against him. Assuredly, Madame, it is not just that he should be rendered unhappy in so many ways. Do not add anything to my severity; seek rather to console him; make all his resentment fall on me, but let your kindness serve to reassure him.

“I will write to him whatever you please; I will never see him again, if such is your wish; I will even withdraw to the country, if you consider it necessary. But do not threaten to send him to the end of the world. He may be of service to his country; he will be the delight of his friends; he will fill you with pride and satisfaction. You have only to guide his talents, and leave his virtues to act for themselves. Forget for a time that you are his mother, if this character is opposed to the kindness that, on my knees, I beg you to extend to him. Finally, Madame, you will see me prefer to retire from the world, or to love him with the love of passion, rather than to suffer him to be any more tormented for me or by me.”

Adrienne did not speak of this letter to her adorer, neither did Madame de Ferriol deem it advisable to communicate it to him; and its existence, in consequence, remained unknown to d'Argental until sixty-three years later, when he discovered it by accident among some old papers which had belonged to his mother.

We may well believe that the old man shed many tears over those faded pages, for Adrienne, while refusing him her love, had succeeded in making him

the most faithful and devoted of all her friends. The process of transition, seldom an easy one, had been rendered the more difficult, inasmuch as, shortly after the above letter was written, d'Argental had the mortification of seeing another take the place which had been denied him. However, Adrienne spared no pains to convince him of the wisdom of her decision, and, at the same time, of the value which she attached to his affection and regard.

"Do not cease either to be prudent or to love me," she writes. "The sentiments that I entertain for you are worth more than the most violent and most disordered passion." And again: "Let my life be the term of your constancy, my dear friend. . . . Adieu, my dear friend; I am very affected in writing to you, and never was I more penetrated by friendship, affection, and esteem. Adieu; do not forget me entirely, or, at any rate, do not allow me to imagine so."

D'Argental, like La Chalotais, made the law his profession, and, in due time, became one of the councillors of the Parliament of Paris. The gravity expected from one holding such a post, however, in no way interfered with his intimacy with Adrienne, who was in the habit of consulting him on all business matters, and, when dying, appointed him her sole executor.<sup>1</sup>

Although there can be little doubt that Adrienne

<sup>1</sup> The acceptance of this charge must have required some little courage on the good councillor's part, since rumour credited him with being something more than a friend to the actress, which is perhaps not altogether a matter for surprise, seeing that he was so frequent a visitor in the Rue des Marais that he "passed for the master of the house, and was addressed by the servants as 'Monsieur' only, without the addition of his name."



MAURICE DE SAXE

From an engraving by J. G. WILL, after the painting by HYACINTHE RIGAUD





was perfectly sincere when she declared her conviction that love was "nothing but a folly which she detested," and that she was still mistress of her heart when she resisted the first overtures of poor d'Argental, it is not improbable that at the time she wrote her celebrated letter to Madame de Ferriol, she had already renounced the wise resolutions with which she had come to Paris in favour of one whom she loved to her life's end with a tenderness, a devotion, and a disinterestedness to which even the most rigid of moralists do not fail to pay tribute.

About the middle of the year 1720, there arrived in Paris a young man who was destined to become one of the most remarkable figures of the eighteenth century—Maurice, "Count of Saxony," celebrated in later years as Maréchal de Saxe. A natural son of Augustus II., Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, and Aurora von Königsmark, sister of the ill-fated lover of George I.'s uncrowned queen, the future victor of Fontenoy was still at this date only a high-born military adventurer in search of some promising field for the exercise of his talents. From his boyhood Maurice had been a soldier. When only twelve years of age, under the direction of the Count von Schulenburg, one of the ablest generals of the time, he had been present at the sieges of Tournay and Mons and the battle of Malplaquet, carrying a musket, like an ordinary *sous-officier*, in a regiment despatched by Augustus II. to the assistance of the Emperor. Returning to the camp of the allies in 1710, he assisted at the sieges of Douai and Béthune, where he displayed such reckless courage as to call forth from Prince Eugène the admonition not to confound rashness with bravery. Two years later, he accompanied his royal

father to the siege of Stralsund, and again exhibited the same impetuosity in an attempt to cut his way through the enemy and engage Charles XII. in single combat. Delighted by his courage, Augustus promoted him colonel the following year, and, at the age of seventeen, gave him the command of a regiment of cuirassiers. The Countess von Königsmark, on her side, worked to assure her son's fortunes by a wealthy marriage, and succeeded in securing for him the hand of the Countess von Löben, the richest heiress in Saxony. This lady's fortune he quickly dissipated, and other and graver causes of complaint against him not being wanting, in 1721 the marriage was annulled. In the meanwhile, Maurice had made a campaign, under Eugène, against the Turks, and had also contrived to irritate his father by breaches of military discipline and other irregularities. In consequence, Augustus II., whose resentment against the young man was artfully fanned by his chief Minister, Count Flemming, who had conceived a strong antipathy to Maurice, advised him to leave Germany and take service with France, and he accordingly set out for Paris. Here he was well received by the Regent, who appointed him *maréchal de camp*, his father soon afterwards purchasing for him the command of the Regiment of Greder, one of the foreign corps in the French Service.

From the moment of his arrival in Paris, Maurice de Saxe claimed a large share of the attention of both Court and town. Tall and superbly built, with "circular black eyebrows, eyes glittering bright, partly with animal vivacity, partly with spiritual," a high complexion, and a frank, open countenance, he was one of the handsomest men of his time. His physical strength was extraordinary; no amount of exertion seemed able to fatigue

him; in war and in the chase he was capable of performing prodigies of endurance; he could break between his fingers crown-pieces and horseshoes. He was seen everywhere. On the parade ground, he brought his regiment to the highest pitch of perfection, invented new formations and tactics, and quickly made himself respected by his superior officers and adored by the soldiers. In the fashionable world, he was equally successful; no *roué* of the Regent's circle could surpass him in extravagance, folly, and debauchery; while, despite his brusque manners, which procured him the sobriquet of *sanglier* (wild boar), he was a welcome guest in many a salon. Soldier, sportsman, athlete, gambler, drinker, and lover, he was all things to all men—and all women.

A great patron of the Comédie-Française, it was inevitable that Maurice de Saxe and Adrienne Lecouvreur should meet, and no less inevitable that the count should pay the actress assiduous court, for if Maurice resembled his father, the "Saxon Man of Sin," in appearance, vivacity, and physical strength, he did so even more closely in his vices. All poor Adrienne's wise resolutions failed her in the presence of this young hero, "to whom," says Des Boulmiers, "hearts offered no more resistance than towns." "From the day that she knew him, she was charmed, subjugated, ravished; it seemed to her that she only then began to live. She surrendered herself as she had never surrendered herself before."<sup>1</sup>

It is not difficult to understand the attraction which Adrienne possessed for Maurice de Saxe, and which kept him, though very far from faithful, at least

<sup>1</sup> M. Paléologue, *Profils de femmes : Adrienne Lecouvreur*.

attached to her for nearly ten years. Her beauty and grace flattered his senses, while her moral qualities appealed to the better side of his nature, to that instinct of heroism and idealism which lay at the root of his character, and which, though often obscured in the midst of his debaucheries, was never wholly extinguished. Less easy is it to comprehend the absolute devotion which Adrienne cherished for him; a devotion which remained proof against absence, infidelity, ill-humour, and indifference, and which endured till the last hour of her life.

We are inclined, however, to think with M. Paléologue—whose study of the actress from the psychological point of view is as admirable as M. Larroumet's from the dramatic—that apart from “that species of fascination and magnetism which the libertine, when he is not of vulgar race, exercises over the feminine mind,” Adrienne had very early discovered the really great qualities of Maurice, and that the prospect of developing them, and of generally exercising a beneficent influence over such a man, was a temptation which an imagination so generous as hers found it impossible to resist.

The results of this influence are well summarised by Lemontey in the *éloge* of the actress which he read at a *séance* of the Academy in 1823:—

“She was then thirty, an age favourable to experience and passion, which renders a woman as skilful to please as prompt to love. As in the time of chivalry, her cares, her tenderness, her wise counsels, initiated her friend into the amiable accomplishments, the benevolent virtues, the polished manners which, in the sequel, made him as much a Frenchman as his victories. Under

her sweet tuition, the Achilles of Homer became the Achilles of Racine. She adorned his mind without enervating it, and modified what seemed extraordinary and singular in the turn of his ideas. She taught him our language, our literature, and inspired him with the taste for poetry, for music, for all the arts, and with that passion for the theatre which followed him even into the camp. One might say of the victor of Fontenoy and his beautiful preceptress that he learned from her everything save war, which he knew better than any one, and orthography, which he never knew at all.”<sup>1</sup>

For four years—that is to say, from 1721 to 1725—the *liaison* between Adrienne and Maurice de Saxe continued without any particular incident; Maurice pursuing his military studies, making journeys to Dresden and Warsaw to visit his father, on whose behalf he seems to have acted as a sort of unofficial ambassador in France, and indulging in a good many *passades*; Adrienne, though she must have very speedily awakened to the fact that what was the all-absorbing interest in her life was but a mere episode in her hero's, loving him none the less devotedly, and deriving consolation from the thought that, if others disputed with her the possession of his heart, she alone possessed his confidence. Then came a long separation. The Duchy of Courland, which for nearly two centuries had been under the protection of Poland, fell vacant through the death of Duke Ferdinand, who ruled in the name of his niece, Anne Ivanovna, afterwards Czarina of Russia, a childless widow. Several candidates for the ducal crown presented themselves, and the unprepossessing duchess found herself beset with suitors, eager to strengthen their claims by securing her

<sup>1</sup> For a specimen of Maurice's orthography, see page 240, *note, infra*.

hand. Augustus II., however, decided to put forward his son, and Anne, having been approached on the matter, expressed herself favourably disposed towards a marriage with the young man.

The prospect of conquering a kingdom for himself with his sword, as, even should the Diet elect him and Anne accept him as her husband, his rivals were not likely to abandon their claims without a struggle, appealed strongly to the adventurous Maurice, and he set out for Courland. Everything augured well for his success, when, one day in May 1726, he received, to his astonishment and disgust, orders from his father to renounce his candidature. Diplomatic complications obliged Augustus to discourage his son's ambition.

Maurice ignored the paternal commands, and some days later found him at Mitau, paying court to the duchess. But, at the same time, in order to leave nothing to chance, he carried on, through the medium of the Saxon ambassador at St. Petersburg, a second matrimonial negotiation, without prejudice to the first, with the Grand Duchess Elizabeth Petrovna, to wit. The ambassador sent to Dresden for a portrait of the count, and showed it to the princess, who was so charmed with the counterfeit presentment that she straightway declared her willingness to espouse the original. Both Anne and Elizabeth, it is hardly necessary to observe, were in blissful ignorance of the double game played by Maurice, who pursued his negotiations with much address, wooing the one lady in person and the other by proxy. Once more matters looked hopeful for the young adventurer, save that now that his father had abandoned him he was in sore straits for money. His mother sent him all she could, but the sums he received from her were

very far from being sufficient for his needs, and he accordingly appealed to the generosity of his friends in France. Adrienne was the first to respond. Though, of course, well aware that, in the event of Maurice's success, she would lose him for ever, the devoted woman never hesitated a moment, but sold or pledged her jewellery and plate, and sent the proceeds—some 40,000 livres<sup>1</sup>—to her lover.

Her generosity, however, was of no avail. In spite of his courage and energy, and the assistance of his friends in France, Maurice failed. On June 28, 1726, he was elected Duke of Courland; "but the problem was to fall in love with the Dowager Anne Ivanovna, a big, brazen Russian woman—(such a cheek the pictures give her, in size and somewhat in expression like a Westphalia ham)—and this, with all his adventurous audacity, Count Maurice could not do."<sup>2</sup> The result was that, after maintaining his authority for about a year and performing prodigies of reckless valour, the new duke, attacked by Russia, proscribed by Poland, abandoned by his partisans, disavowed by his father, renounced by Anne ("who had discovered that he did not like Westphalia hams in that particular form, that he only pretended to like them"), and by the Grand Duchess, who had fathomed his little scheme, was compelled to surrender his dukedom and shake the dust of Courland off his feet.

That during this long separation Maurice remained faithful to his absent mistress is very improbable. From the diplomatic correspondence of the time, it would appear that the handsome adventurer had aroused among

<sup>1</sup> And not £30,000, as Carlyle and so many writers have stated.

<sup>2</sup> Carlyle's "History of Frederick the Great," ii. 160.

the fair sex of Saxony, Poland, and Courland a veritable enthusiasm. All the great ladies of Dresden, Warsaw, Mitau, and Riga had espoused his cause, and compelled their husbands to do likewise. "Count Poicey (Grand Marshal of Lithuania)," wrote one of the ministers of Augustus II., "has gone into this affair, like Adam into sin, seduced by his wife." When the Diet of Mitau elected Maurice duke, the delight of his fair partisans knew no bounds. "The women cannot sleep for joy," wrote the Saxon ambassador at St. Petersburg. "As many thousand crowns as our hero has just made Actæons would be very welcome to me."

Nevertheless, in spite of his military and political occupations and his presumed *bonnes fortunes*, Maurice found time to think of Adrienne, to write to her "twice a week regularly," and to "testify towards her more affection and confidence than ever." Adrienne, in her turn, passes on the news to one of her friends in an interesting letter, in which she shows herself thoroughly conversant with the somewhat complicated state of affairs in Poland. She deplores the "disgraceful weakness" of Augustus II., who "allowed himself to be governed by the most cruel enemy of his glory (his Minister Flemming), and the most bitter enemy of the son of whom he was unworthy"; severely censures the conduct of the English Government, "which had promised assistance which it had now no intention of rendering," and declares that she was "dying of fear" and "tormented to an extent which she could not describe."

On October 23, 1728, Maurice returned to Paris, and the lovers were united once more. "A person expected for a very long time arrives this evening,"



writes Adrienne to a friend, "apparently in moderately good health. A courier has come on in advance, because the berlin in which they were travelling broke down thirty leagues from here. They have started in a post-chaise, and this evening they will be here." The *liaison* was resumed, but it seems to have been troubled by frequent storms. Maurice returned a disappointed man; the future seemed dark, his star was temporarily hidden; a life of inaction, always trying to one of his restless, ambitious temperament, was well-nigh intolerable after the adventurous years he had spent in Courland. He sought relief in pleasure—the chase, high play, and gallantry; wearied of that, and endeavoured to kill time by the study of mathematics and the art of war and the composition of his curious *Rêveries*. Wearied of that also, turned to Adrienne for consolation, and vented his ill-humour upon her. Claiming the utmost liberty for himself, he was, nevertheless, indisposed to concede even a small measure of it to his mistress. He grew jealous and suspicious of her friends, and even believed, or professed to believe, that her relations with one of them were exceeding the limits of friendship; for we find Adrienne writing to a confidant as follows:—

"I am worn out with anger and grief; I have been dissolved in tears this livelong night. Perhaps it is unreasonable of me, since I have nothing wherewith to reproach myself; but I cannot endure severity so little deserved. They suspect me; they do more, they accuse me; they do worse still, they wish to convict me, and that without giving me an opportunity of defending myself, in such a way that, if chance does not enable me to ascertain what is happening, I shall be

covered with the most horrible calumny possible to conceive, by a man who has borne the name of my friend for ten years. They do not wish me to tell you this. I esteem and love tenderly him who forbids me, but I know not how to keep it to myself; I am too affected, too wounded, and too alarmed for the future not to reveal it, at any rate, to you. I need advice. A man capable of this calumny may very well imagine others; and that which distresses me the more is the necessity for dissimulation. To exclaim against deceit is natural, and I would prefer to pardon it rather than to be compelled to restrain both my grief and my feelings. I have been told that it is his way of thinking, that he does not intend to do me any wrong in confounding me with the generality of women. I cannot entertain this idea. That is not the language he has held to me for ten years, and ought not to be the reward of my attention to please him and to make him esteem me, at least, according to my deserts. What can one do to me, after all, save wound me in the place where I am the most sensitive? I could destroy in an instant the error in question; but how am I to console myself for the intention of this calumny? This is not a chance suspicion; it is a confidence made to a man who has no feeling for me, save friendship, but whose friendship is worth more than all the passions in the world, whose esteem is more precious to me than life, and whose companionship is more necessary for me than all the fortunes in the universe. It is before him that I am made to appear false and contemptible. Whatever he says, they attest my supposed crime. *O mon Dieu!* What are we to do?"

Seventeen months after Maurice's return to France Adrienne died, under peculiarly dramatic circumstances ; popular rumour ascribing her death to poison administered by the agents of the Duchesse de Bouillon,<sup>1</sup> a pretender to the heart of the Saxon hero, who was already under suspicion of having made an attempt upon her rival's life. To arrive at a satisfactory conclusion in regard to this very mysterious affair, it would be necessary to have before us the *dossier* containing the report of the autopsy and other important documents of which Sainte-Beuve speaks in his well-known study of the actress. This *dossier* has, however, disappeared, and it is uncertain if it is still in existence ; the probability is that it has been destroyed. Sainte-Beuve's conclusion was that the Duchesse de Bouillon was guiltless, not only of Adrienne's death, which he ascribes to natural causes, but of any attempt on her life. The former opinion was, no doubt, justified by the evidence which the lost *dossier* contained. But the latter, which seems to have been based on an altogether misplaced belief in the veracity of a certain Abbé Aunillon—who was on terms of the closest intimacy with the accused duchess, and invented a most ingenious defence on behalf of his friend, which we need not enter into here—the great critic would probably have seen cause to alter had he been acquainted with the documents which have

<sup>1</sup> Louise Henriette Françoise of Lorraine (Mlle. de Guise), daughter of the Prince and Princesse d'Harcourt, and fourth wife of Emmanuel Théodose de la Tour d'Auvergne, Duc de Bouillon, whom she married in 1725. Here is a contemporary portrait of her : "Very pretty ; rather tall than short ; neither stout nor slender ; an oval face ; a broad forehead ; black eyes and eyebrows ; brown hair ; very wide mouth and very red lips."

been brought to light of recent years by M. Ravaisson, M. Campardon, and M. Monval.

Let us, however, borrow the account of the affair given a few days after Adrienne's death, by Mlle. Aïssé in a letter to Madame Calandrini, and which, she declares, had been furnished her by "a friend of the Lecouvreur," probably d'Argental, to whom she was related:—

"Madame de Bouillon is capricious, violent, headstrong, and much addicted to gallantry. Her tastes extend from the prince to the actor.<sup>1</sup> She conceived a fancy for the Comte de Saxe, who had none for her. Not that he piques himself on his fidelity to the Lecouvreur; for, together with his passion for her, he has a thousand little passing tastes. But he was neither flattered nor anxious to reply to the impulsiveness of Madame de Bouillon, who was enraged at seeing her charms despised, and who had no doubt that the Lecouvreur was the obstacle that stood in the way of the passion that the Count would otherwise naturally entertain for her.<sup>2</sup> To destroy this obstacle, she resolved to get rid of the actress, and, in order to put this horrible design into execution, chose a young abbé,<sup>3</sup> with whom

<sup>1</sup> She numbered among her lovers the Comte de Clermont, a Prince of the Blood, the actors Quinault-Dufresne and Grandval of the Comédie-Française, and a singer of the Opera, named Tribou.

<sup>2</sup> The real obstacle was probably an Opera girl named Cartou, of whom Maurice was desperately enamoured. According to Grimm, this young lady followed her lover to the famous Camp of Mühlberg, in Saxony, where she had the honour of supping with two kings, Augustus II. of Poland and Frederick William of Prussia, and two future kings, Augustus III. and Frederick the Great.

<sup>3</sup> His name was Bouret, and he was the son of a government official at Metz. He was at this time nineteen years of age, and had come to Paris, some months before, to study painting.

she was not personally acquainted, to be the instrument of her vengeance. He was approached by two men at the Tuileries, who proposed to him, after a rather lengthy conversation regarding his poverty, to free himself from his distress by obtaining admission, under favour of his skill in painting, into Lecouvreur's house, and persuading her to eat some lozenges, which would be given him. The poor abbé objected strongly, on account of the heinousness of the crime ; but the two men replied that it no longer depended upon him to refuse, since he would do so on peril of his life. The abbé, terrified, promised everything ; and was conducted to Madame de Bouillon, who confirmed the promises and threats, and handed him the lozenges. The abbé begged that a few days might be allowed him for the execution of these projects ; and Mlle. Lecouvreur received one day, on returning home with one of her friends and an actress named Lamothe, an anonymous letter, in which she was implored to come immediately, either alone or with some one on whom she could depend, to the garden of the Luxembourg, where, at the fifth tree in one of the main avenues, she would find a man who had something of the last importance to communicate to her. As it was then precisely the hour appointed for the rendez-vous, she re-entered her coach and set out thither, accompanied by the two persons who were with her. She found the abbé, who accosted her and related to her the odious commission with which he had been entrusted, declaring that he was incapable of committing such a crime ; but that he was at a loss what to do, inasmuch as he was sure to be assassinated.

“The Lecouvreur told him that, for the safety of both, the whole affair must be denounced to the

Lieutenant of Police. The abbé replied that he feared that, if he were to do this, he might make himself enemies too powerful for him to resist; but that, if she believed this precaution necessary for her safety, he would not hesitate to maintain what he had told her. The Lecouvreur took him in her coach to M. Hérault (the Lieutenant of Police), who, on the facts being laid before him, asked the abbé for the lozenges and threw them to a dog, who died a quarter of an hour afterwards. He next inquired of him which of the two Bouillons<sup>1</sup> had given him this commission, and, when the abbé replied that it was the duchess, showed no surprise. M. Hérault continued to question him, and asked if he would venture to support this accusation publicly; to which the abbé replied that he could put him in prison and afterwards confront him with Madame de Bouillon.

“The Lieutenant of Police sent him away, and informed the cardinal (de Fleury) of this adventure. The cardinal was very indignant, and desired in the first instance that the affair should be most strictly investigated. But the relatives and friends of the Bouillon family persuaded the cardinal not to give publicity to so scandalous an affair, and succeeded in appeasing him. Some months later, no one knows how, the adventure was made public and caused a terrible commotion. Madame de Bouillon’s brother-in-law spoke of it to his brother, and told him that it was absolutely imperative that his wife should clear herself from such a suspicion,

<sup>1</sup> The Duchesse and her stepson’s wife, the Princesse de Bouillon (Marie Charlotte Sobieska), wife of Charles Godefroi de la Tour d’Auvergne, Prince de Bouillon, whom she married in 1724. Several writers have confounded the two ladies, and Scribe and Legouvé, in their tragedy, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, make the *princess*, and not the duchess, the rival and murderess of the heroine.

and that he ought to ask for a *lettre de cachet* to shut the abbé up. There was no difficulty in obtaining this *lettre de cachet*, and the poor wretch was arrested and taken to the Bastille. He was examined, and maintained with firmness all that he had said. Many promises and threats were used to induce him to retract. All kinds of expedients were suggested to him, as, for instance, madness or a passion for the Lecouvreur, which had prompted him to invent this fable, in order to please her. Nothing, however, could move him; he never varied in his answers, and was kept in prison.

“The Lecouvreur wrote to the abbé’s father, who lived in the country and was unaware of his son’s misfortune. The poor man came at once to Paris, and demanded that his son should either be formally brought to trial or set at liberty. He addressed himself to the cardinal, who inquired of Madame de Bouillon whether she wished the affair to be tried, as otherwise the abbé could not be kept in prison. Madame de Bouillon, dreading publicity and unable to get the abbé assassinated in the Bastille, consented to his liberation. During the two months that the father remained in Paris nothing happened to the son. But when the father had returned to the country, the abbé, having had the imprudence to stay in Paris, suddenly disappeared. No one knows whether he is dead or not, but nothing is heard of him.”<sup>1</sup>

Incredible as this story may appear, it, nevertheless, accords in all important details with the documents which M. Monval has extracted from the Archives of the Bastille, preserved in the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal.

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Mademoiselle d’Aïssé à Madame Calandrini* (edit. 1846), p. 230 et seq.

The interview at the Tuileries, the conversation with the Duchesse de Bouillon, the suspicious lozenges—all that is true. The Abbé Bouret, imprisoned at Saint-Lazare, confirmed it in a series of examinations to which he was subjected.<sup>1</sup>

Bouret had been arrested on July 29, 1729, and he was kept in prison for three months. During his confinement Adrienne wrote to him, entreating him to withdraw his charge against the Duchesse de Bouillon, if it were untrue, and promising, in that event, to obtain his pardon. She also sent him money, clothes, and books, and did all she could to lighten his imprisonment.

Thanks to the efforts of his father, who, though ill, had hastened to Paris so soon as he was informed of his son's arrest, Bouret was released on October 23, when Adrienne advised him to leave Paris at once, pointing out that the affair had now become common knowledge, and that, if he lingered, the Bouillon family would certainly cause him to be rearrested.

Well would it have been for Bouret had he followed the actress's advice; but, unfortunately, his father's illness took so serious a turn that it was impossible for

<sup>1</sup> The points in which Mlle. Aïssé's story and Bouret's evidence differ are as follows:—

(1) Bouret was acquainted with the Duchesse de Bouillon *prior* to his adventure, having been employed by her to paint her portrait. (2) He had not one, but several interviews with her two emissaries, who, he stated, wore masks. (3) He received the suspicious lozenges after, and not before, warning Adrienne. (4) It was not the Lieutenant of Police, Hérault, but the Chemist Geoffroy, of the Académie des Sciences, who made the experiment on the dog. He reported that some of the lozenges appeared suspicious, but that their number was insufficient to permit of his conducting experiments and forming a definite opinion. This, as M. Larroumet remarks, is the language of a man who is unwilling to compromise himself.



him to undertake the journey to Lorraine, and the abbé remained to nurse him. Meanwhile, the scandal had assumed such dimensions that the Duc de Bouillon obtained a new *lettre de cachet*, by virtue of which, on January 23, 1730, Bouret was again arrested and conveyed first to For l'Évêque and afterwards back to Saint-Lazare, on a charge of "poisoning or giving false information to the celebrated actress Lecouvreur."

The public interest in the affair had, not improbably, been stimulated by a singular incident which had occurred at the Comédie-Française during the previous autumn. On October 18, Adrienne was playing the part of Phèdre, when, perceiving the Duchesse de Bouillon complacently watching her performance from one of the boxes on the first tier, her feelings overcame her, and, turning in the direction of her enemy, she repeated with unmistakable emphasis the indignant lines:—

"Je sais mes perfidies,  
Œnone, et ne suis pas de ces femmes hardies  
Qui, goûtant dans les crimes une tranquille paix,  
Ont su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais."

The pit, whose sympathies were entirely on the side of the actress, burst into loud applause, amidst which the duchess angrily quitted the theatre.<sup>1</sup>

Adrienne did not play again until the evening of November 10, owing to ill-health, when she again appeared as Phèdre. The accounts of the Comédie-Française show that, on the following day, a sum of 1 livre, 10 sols was paid for a coach "to go to the Hôtel de Bouillon, on the matter of the footmen," and similar

<sup>1</sup> Scribe and Legouvé make this incident one of the principal scenes of their tragedy.

entries occur on the 20th and 30th of the same month. From this M. Monval supposes that the duchess, in order to avenge the affront she had received, had sent her lackeys to create a disturbance and hiss Adrienne.<sup>1</sup>

Early in the following March, Bouret was removed to the Bastille, where he persistently adhered to the statements he had made before Hérault and at Saint-Lazare; and on May 18, Père de Couvrigny, the Jesuit confessor attached to the prison, wrote to the Lieutenant of Police the following significant note:—

“I have visited and had a long conversation with the young abbé brought from Saint-Lazare, and have made strong representations to him on the baseness of the calumny of which he has been guilty. He appears very firm in maintaining that he has done no wrong to others, but that he cannot wrong himself. *The matter is very terrible and serious.*”

Terrible and serious it most certainly was, for Adrienne had died two months before, after a very short illness; and the firmness with which Bouret continued to adhere to his accusation against the Duchesse de Bouillon gave the affair a still more sinister complexion. On July 8, he wrote to Hérault:—

“Permit me to cast myself at your feet to implore your protection. I believe that you will not refuse it to me, inasmuch as you are the protector of the innocent. Alas! cast a pitying glance on my misfortunes. It is a sad spectacle for you; you will see nothing but tears, groans, and fears; in a word, all that an agitated mind can exhibit. That is the sad state to which I

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres d'Adrienne Lecouvreur*, p. 51.

have been reduced for a whole year. The fury of my enemies ought to be satisfied. You are my only hope; in you I have placed my trust; decide upon my fate, Monseigneur; I will subscribe to everything that I am able to; but, as for my departing from what I have deposed to, were death with all its terrors to appear before my eyes, I would prefer it to calumniating myself."

But, six weeks later, Bouret completely alters his tone, and on August 24 writes again to Hérault:—

"As you have done me the honour to order me to speak the truth touching the Duchesse de Bouillon, I obey your commands. Here it is. The desire that I had to become acquainted with the Lecouvreur induced me to invent a pretext for gaining admission to her house. . . . I declare to you that the duchess is innocent of everything of which I have accused her. Pardon a wretched man, whose only crimes are a fevered brain and much imprudence."<sup>1</sup>

After this recantation, the unfortunate youth remained a prisoner for nine months longer, when he was finally set at liberty (June 3, 1731). From that date nothing more is heard of him, though there is no reason to assume, with Mlle. Aïssé, that he was the victim of foul play. He probably lost not a moment in returning to Lorraine, heartily glad to turn his back upon the city in which he had suffered so much.

That Adrienne Lecouvreur had been the object of an attempt at poisoning on the part of Madame de Bouillon admits, we think, of very little doubt. Barely half a century had passed since the famous Poison Trials, in

<sup>1</sup> Cited M. Georges Monval, *Lettres d'Adrienne Lecouvreur*, p. 57.

which many a high-born dame, including, by the way, another Duchesse de Bouillon,<sup>1</sup> had been compromised. What had occurred with terrible frequency in 1680 was not impossible in 1730; nor does the passionate, vindictive, and unscrupulous character of the duchess render her culpability any the less probable. Again, although Bouret ultimately withdrew his accusation, he persisted in it for many months after his second arrest, in spite of the prospect that a recantation would ensure his release. Thirdly, the official investigation of the affair was very incomplete, and the authorities appear to have had no other object in view than to obtain Bouret's recantation and hush the matter up. Finally, if the duchess were innocent, why, we may well ask, did she not take steps to clear her reputation by prosecuting her accuser before the courts? 'Why did she prefer to remain under the shadow of so hideous a suspicion to the end of her life?

But even if the charge against Madame de Bouillon is to be considered proved, it seems to us in the highest degree improbable that the attempt against Adrienne was renewed, and that the actress fell a victim to it, as so many persons asserted at the time, and as some writers, including M. Monval, still believe. Let us, however, listen to Mlle. Aïssé's version of the circumstances connected with Adrienne's death:—

“Since then (Bouret's denunciation of the duchess), the Lecouvreur has been on her guard. One day, at the theatre, after the principal piece, Madame de Bouillon sent to ask her to come to her box. The Lecouvreur was extremely surprised, and answered that her toilette

<sup>1</sup> Marie Anne Mancini, Racine's enemy.

was not finished, and it was impossible for her to present herself. The duchess sent a second time, and was told, in reply to her invitation, that the Lecouvreur was about to appear on the stage, but that she would obey her commands when she quitted it. Madame de Bouillon begged her not to fail her, and, as she was making her exit, met her, bestowed upon her all sorts of caresses, complimented her highly on her acting, and assured her that to see her give so finished a rendering of the part which she had just played had afforded her infinite pleasure. Some time afterwards, the Lecouvreur became so ill in the middle of a piece that she was unable to finish it. When the "orator" came forward to make the announcement, the whole pit eagerly demanded news of her condition. Since that day, her health declined and she grew thin and feeble. On the last occasion on which she performed, she took the part of Jocaste in the *Œdipe* of Voltaire. The rôle is a somewhat trying one. Before the play began, she was seized with a violent attack of dysentery. . . . It was pitiful to see her exhaustion and weakness. Although I was in ignorance of her indisposition, I remarked two or three times to Madame de Parabère<sup>1</sup> that I felt very distressed on her account. Between the two pieces we were informed of the nature of her illness, and were astonished when she reappeared in the afterpiece, *Le Florentin*, and undertook a very long and difficult part,<sup>2</sup> which, however,

<sup>1</sup> Marie Magdeleine de la Vieuville, Comtesse de Parabère (1693-1750). On her husband's death, in 1716, she became *maîtresse en titre* of the Regent d'Orléans, which exalted position she occupied for five years, when the prince, wearying of her caprices, replaced her by Madame Ferrand d'Averne.

<sup>2</sup> That of Hortense. According to Titon du Tillet, Adrienne had never been surpassed in this character.

she played to perfection, and, to all appearance, as if it gave her pleasure. The audience showed that they greatly appreciated her decision to continue playing, and it was no longer said, as it had been previously, that she was suffering from the effects of poison. The poor creature returned home, and, four days later, at one o'clock in the afternoon, when she was believed to be out of danger, she died. She had convulsions, which never happens in cases of dysentery,<sup>1</sup> and went out like a candle. The body was opened, and the bowels were found to be ulcerated. . . . If the suspected lady had appeared at the theatre under these circumstances, she would have been driven from the house. She had the effrontery to send every day to the Lecouvreur's house to inquire as to her condition."<sup>2</sup>

If, as Sainte-Beuve and M. Larroumet point out, the Duchesse de Bouillon had really intended to poison Adrienne, the moment chosen for her attempt was singularly inopportune. Suspected by the public of a previous attempt upon the actress's life, with Bouret still in prison and an investigation of the affair hanging over her head, the most ordinary prudence must have dictated to her, if determined on the crime, the advisability of deferring her horrible design at least until she had cleared herself from the charge under which she then lay. The daily inquiries she caused to be made during Adrienne's illness, of which Mlle. Aïssé speaks with such indignation, were no doubt actuated by a sincere desire for the actress's recovery; not, of course, for the poor woman's own sake, but because she foresaw that her

<sup>1</sup> This is not the case.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres de Mademoiselle d'Aïssé à Madame Calandrini*, p. 234 et seq.

death at such a time would render her own position even more unpleasant than it already was.

But there is a far stronger argument in the duchess's favour than the one which we have just stated. Adrienne's correspondence, published by M. Monval, shows that for some years past she had been in very delicate health. "I have not had twelve hours' health since I last saw you," she writes to d'Argental, during the latter's visit to England; while in other letters she complains of being always "insupportably fatigued," and of being "in despair in regard to her health." Moreover—and this is a point of the greatest importance—she was subject to a chronic affection of the intestines, and, in the winter of 1725–1726, had had an attack of dysentery, which all but proved fatal; the very malady of which she eventually died.

It would therefore appear that, however strongly facts may point to Madame de Bouillon's guilt in regard to the charge brought against her by Bouret, it would be manifestly unjust to saddle her with any responsibility for Adrienne's death. Everything, indeed, seems to indicate natural causes; nothing confirms the theory of poison.

Adrienne was taken ill on Tuesday, March 14, and she died on the following Monday, the 20th inst. Maurice de Saxe, Voltaire, and a surgeon named Faget were with her when the end came; and the faithful d'Argental, who had been hurriedly summoned, reached the house a few minutes after she had breathed her last. Neither of her three friends, however, though each possessed influence in his way, was able to save the remains of the celebrated actress from the worst indignity ever offered to those of a member of the theatrical profession in France.

Adrienne's house was situated in the parish of Saint-Sulpice, the curé of which, Languet de Gergy, was one of the most bigoted and obstinate priests in Paris. When the end was seen to be near, he was sent for to receive the usual renunciation and administer the last Sacraments, but accounts differ as to what occurred. Some writers declare that when he arrived the actress was already dead, or at least on the point of death; others that she firmly refused to renounce her profession, and, on the curé continuing to exhort her to repentance, pointed with outstretched hand to a bust of Maurice de Saxe which stood near her bed, and exclaimed:—

“*Voilà mon univers, mon espoir, et mes dieux !*”

What is certain, is that Adrienne died without the Sacraments, and that Languet de Gergy refused her not only Christian burial (this, as we have seen, had been the invariable practice of the Paris clergy in regard to members of her profession who had died under similar circumstances, ever since the time of Molière), but interment in the cemetery at all, even in that portion of it which was reserved for heretics and unbaptized children—a refusal *absolutely without precedent* in the history of the theatre.

In the morning of March 21, an autopsy was performed on the body of the deceased actress (according to Voltaire, on his application), when the doctors decided that Adrienne had died a natural death, an opinion to which the poet himself subscribes.<sup>1</sup> Later in the day, Maurepas, in his capacity of Minister for Paris, wrote

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire wrote and signed the following note: “She died in my arms of an inflammation of the intestines, and it was I who caused an autopsy to be performed. All that Mlle. Aïssé says on the subject are only popular rumours which have no foundation.”—Cited by M. Monval.



to the Lieutenant of Police, informing him that it was the intention of Cardinal de Fleury not to interfere in the matter of ecclesiastical burial, but to leave it entirely to the discretion of the Archbishop of Paris and the curé of Saint-Sulpice. "If," he added, "they persist in refusing it to her, as they appear inclined to do, she must be taken away to-night and interred with as little scandal as possible."<sup>1</sup>

At midnight, accordingly, the mortal remains of poor Adrienne were placed in a hackney-coach, and, preceded by two street porters bearing torches, and escorted by a squad of the watch and a M. de Laubinière—whom Sainte-Beuve supposes to have been a friend of the actress, but who, M. Monval thinks, was a representative of the Lieutenant of Police—conveyed to a piece of waste land near the Seine, and there buried, quicklime being thrown over the body, and no stone or mark of any kind being placed to indicate where it lay.<sup>2</sup>

The refusal of admission to the unconsecrated portion of the cemetery—a circumstance, as we have already observed, absolutely without precedent<sup>3</sup>—the secret removal, the presence of the representatives of the Lieu-

<sup>1</sup> Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du Lundi*, i. 174. This letter formed part of the last *dossier*.

<sup>2</sup> The spot where Adrienne was buried was discovered, in 1786, by d'Argental. It was at the south-east angle of the Rues de Grenelle and de Bourgogne, on ground now occupied by No. 115 in the former street. The old man erected a marble tablet, inscribed with some rather indifferent verses of his own composition, to the memory of the actress on an adjoining wall. "This tablet," says M. Monval, "is still preserved by Madame Jouvencel, the present (1892) owner of No. 115 Rue de Grenelle."

<sup>3</sup> Two years before Adrienne's old teacher, Le Grand, had died, also without renouncing his profession. He was, of course, denied Christian burial, but no objection was raised by the curé of Saint-Sulpice to his interment in the unconsecrated portion of the cemetery.

tenant of Police at the interment, the precautions taken to destroy the corpse by quicklime and to conceal the grave, all point to an intention on the part of the authorities to render a second autopsy impossible. But the most scandalous part of the whole affair is the conduct of Languet de Gergy and his superior, the Archbishop of Paris, in lending themselves to a deliberate attempt to defeat the ends of justice in the interests of Madame de Bouillon and her powerful friends.

A question which has naturally given rise to a good deal of conjecture is the conduct of Maurice de Saxe on this occasion. Egotist and libertine though he was, he was a sincere friend and capable of generous impulses; moreover, even at this period, he possessed no little influence at Court, where he was feared even more than he was respected. Such being the case, it seems almost inconceivable that he should, so far as is known, have made not the slightest effort to save the remains of the woman who had loved him so long and so tenderly from so gross an indignity. In our opinion, the most probable, as well as the most charitable, explanation of the matter is, that Maurice was taken completely by surprise; that the arrangements of the police were carried out with such secrecy and despatch that no inkling of their intentions was permitted to reach him until it was too late for him to intervene.

Another of Adrienne's friends, though, like Maurice, powerless to prevent the barbarous treatment to which she had been subjected, protested against it with all the strength of his generous nature. On the morrow of her burial, Voltaire addressed to Falkener a letter in verse, in which he recalled the honours recently paid to two English actresses, and drew an eloquent comparison

between their pompous obsequies and those of poor Adrienne, who had been denied even the privilege of "two tapers and a coffin." But the justly indignant poet went much further than this. On the same day, a meeting of the members of the Comédie-Française was held at the theatre. Voltaire attended, and, in an eloquent speech, called upon the actors to refuse to exercise their profession "until they had secured for the pensioners of the King the rights which were accorded to those who had not the honour of serving his Majesty." His hearers promised to follow his advice, but they did nothing in the matter. The age of strikes had not yet arrived, and they preferred opprobrium with a little money to honour and an empty treasury.

Shortly afterwards, Voltaire composed his fine poem on the death of Adrienne, in which he gave full vent to the feelings of indignation and contempt which consumed him :—

"Que direz-vous, race future,  
Lorsque vous apprendrez, la flétrissante injure  
Qu'à ces arts désolés font des hommes cruel !  
Ils privent de la sépulture  
Celle qui dans la Grèce aurait eu des autels.  
Quand elle était au monde, ils soupiraient pour elle ;  
Je les ai vu soumis, autour d'elle empressés :  
Sitôt qu'elle n'est plus, elle est donc criminelle !  
Eh ! a charmé le monde et vous l'en punissez !"

The annual closing of the theatre took place on March 24, when Grandval, as the youngest *sociétaire*, pronounced, according to custom, before the assembled company, an *éloge* upon their deceased colleague. This *éloge* had been written by Voltaire himself, and with it we may appropriately conclude our sketch of this cele-

brated actress, who was not only a great artist, but a noble, high-souled, and cultured woman, who had all the feminine virtues, save one, for the lack of which, when we pause to consider the temptations of her profession, the moral standard of the age in which she lived, and the generosity and devotion she displayed towards those who had won her heart, we shall find it difficult not to pardon her:—

“I feel, Messieurs, that your regrets recall that inimitable actress, who might almost be said to have invented the art of speaking to the heart and of presenting sentiment and truth where once had been shown little but artificiality and declamation.

“Mlle. Lecouvreur—permit us the consolation of naming her—made one feel in every character which she impersonated all the delicacy, all the soul, all the decorum that one could desire: she was worthy to speak before you, Messieurs. Among those who deign to listen to me are several who honoured her by their friendship; they are aware that she was the ornament of society, as well as of the theatre; while those who knew her only as the actress can readily judge, from the degree of perfection to which she had attained, that not only had she an abundance of wit, but that she further possessed the art of rendering wit amiable.

“You are too just, Messieurs, not to regard this tribute of praise as a duty: I dare even to say that, in regretting her, I am merely your interpreter.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres d'Adrienne Lecouvreur*, by M. Georges Monval, p. 67.

IV

MADemoiselle DE CAMARGO



## IV

### MADemoisELLE DE CAMARGO

THE Abbé d'Allainval, in his *Lettre à Mylord . . . sur Baron et la demoiselle Lecouvreur*, reminds his mythical correspondent that he had found in Paris four wonders: (1) The Tuileries. (2) The acting of the demoiselle Lecouvreur. (3) The dancing of the demoiselle Camargo. (4) The voice of the demoiselle Lemaure. It is of the third of these wonders that we are now about to speak.

Marie-Anne de Cupis de Camargo, the most celebrated *danseuse* of her time, whose talents have been exalted by the chroniclers, sung by the poets, celebrated in every way in both prose and verse, and immortalised by Voltaire, was born at Brussels on April 10, 1710. On her father's side, she was descended from "one of the noblest families in Rome," which had given to the Church a cardinal, an archbishop, and various minor dignitaries. Through her grandmother, she was related to the Spanish house of Camargo, and it was under this name that she pirouetted into fame.

The means of Marie-Anne's father, Ferdinand Joseph de Cupis, "seigneur de Renoussart," were, unfortunately, very far from equal to his birth and connections; nor was his position rendered any easier by the fact that he had been imprudent enough to espouse a lady as high-born and as poor as himself, who, in default of

a dot, had presented him with seven pledges of her affection. He lived at Brussels, "on the crumbs which fell from the table of the Prince de Ligne," and the fees he received from giving music and dancing lessons, and gallantly endeavoured to bring his children up in a manner befitting those of a gentleman "who could prove sixteen quarterings on both his father and mother's side."

Such a treasure as Marie-Anne promised to become, however, was worthy of any sacrifice. "Hercules in his cradle," says Castil-Blaze, "strangled the serpents who came to devour him. The talent of Mlle. de Camargo was not less precocious. While she was in the arms of her nurse, the sound of a violin reached her ears, and inspired her to gestures and movements so animated, so gay, so perfectly harmonious that it was at once perceived that this virtuoso of six months would one day be one of the first *danseuses* in Europe."<sup>1</sup> The delighted M. de Cupis thenceforth devoted every moment he could spare to the instruction of his little daughter, and at the age of ten Marie-Anne danced so charmingly in the salons of Brussels, that every one vowed that it would be nothing less than a crime to withhold from her the applause of the public. Accordingly, the noble dancing-master's consent having been obtained, the Princesse de Ligne and some other ladies of the Court clubbed together, and sent her at their own expense to Paris, to take lessons from Mlle. Prévost, then the queen of the Opera.

After remaining in Paris for some months, and learning all that Mlle. Prévost could teach her, the little girl returned to Brussels, and made her *début* at the theatre with such astonishing success that, in spite of her

<sup>1</sup> *La Danse et des Ballets*, p. 190.





MADemoisELLE PRÉVOST

From the painting by JEAN RAOUX, in the Musée of Tours



youth, she was appointed *première danseuse*. This position she held for three years, when Pélissier, director of the Rouen theatre, offered her an engagement. Marie-Anne wished to accept the offer; Rouen, ever since the days of Molière, had been regarded as the conservatoire of the Paris theatres; its playgoers were not only the most enthusiastic, but the most critical in France, and the actor, singer, or *danseuse* who was fortunate enough to secure their suffrages might reckon with certainty on a favourable reception in the capital. M. de Cupis, however, demurred; he did not wish to allow his daughter to go alone to Rouen, neither did he see his way to leave his pupils at Brussels; and it was not until Pélissier offered him the post of ballet-master, and his eldest son, François, a place in the orchestra that he gave his consent, and the whole Cupis family set out for Normandy.

Poor M. de Cupis would not have been so ready to turn his back on Brussels had he been aware that Pélissier was hovering on the verge of bankruptcy, and that his engagement of Marie-Anne was merely intended to stave off the evil day a little longer. For a time, however, all went well; Marie-Anne's dancing delighted the critical Rouennais, even more than it had the indulgent Flemings, and the theatre was crowded every night with applauding spectators. But her triumphs came too late to save Pélissier; and one fine spring morning, in 1726, that gentleman failed, and *danseuse*, ballet-master, and musician found themselves out of employment.

Matters looked serious indeed for the seigneur de Renoussart and his seven children; but, happily, at that moment Fortune knocked at their door, in the shape of Francine, who was about to become Director of the Paris Opera. The fame of the little prodigy had, it appeared,

reached the capital, and Francine had journeyed to Rouen to offer her a *début* at the Académie Royale de Musique.

The offer, as may be supposed, was joyfully accepted, and Marie-Anne, with her family in her train, migrated to Paris. Here she decided to abandon her patronymic, in favour of that of her grandmother, which had a more artistic sound; and on May 5, 1726, made her *début* under the name of Mlle. de Camargo.

Mlle. Prévost, already jealous of her former pupil, perhaps from a presentiment, had treacherously advised her to make her *début* in a ballet called *Les Caractères de la danse*, in a step so difficult that none but the most celebrated dancers ever dared to attempt it. But, to her intense mortification, Mlle. de Camargo not only performed every movement correctly, but with a brilliancy, a verve, a vivacity which far surpassed all her predecessors. "Never," says a contemporary writer, "had the auditorium resounded with such applause as that which greeted the *débutante*. Such was the enthusiasm of the public that nothing else was talked about but the young Camargo." All the new fashions were named after her: coiffures *à la Camargo*, gowns *à la Camargo*, sleeves *à la Camargo*, shoes *à la Camargo*.<sup>1</sup> On the second night on which she appeared, there were twenty duels and quarrels without number at the doors of the Opera; all Paris was determined to get in, even at the sword-point.

Mlle. de Camargo was not beautiful; indeed some of her contemporaries go so far as to assert that she was positively ugly: "a real monster, like her predecessor Mlle. Prévost," says one ungallant critic; while Noverre

<sup>1</sup> Her shoemaker, one Choisy by name, found himself on a sudden overwhelmed with customers. All the ladies of the Court and the town wanted to be shod by the man who made such divine little shoes.

declares that "Nature had denied her every imaginable grace," and that she was "neither tall, nor pretty, nor well-formed." But whatever may have been her defects of face or figure, they did not interfere with her professional success. "The moment she began to dance people forgot her face. Besides, no one had time to see whether she was ugly or beautiful, so light and rapid were her movements. Her skips and twirls bewildered the audience. Then her countenance was changed, transfigured. 'Then her black eyes were full of smiles and provocations, while her laughing lips revealed her ivory teeth.' She did not seem to dance for the public, but for herself, for her own pleasure. Never had one imagined so many seductions, so many caprices, so much gaiety. 'It would be vain,' says Cahusac, 'to seek a playfulness more frank, a vivacity more natural.'"<sup>1</sup>

Not the least important factor in the success of the young *danseuse* seems to have been the fashion of her skirt, which she had curtailed to a point which the most daring of her predecessors had never even dreamed of. This innovation was extremely popular with the younger patrons of the Opera, but, on the other hand, alarmed the modesty of many of the more conservative playgoers.

"Camargo," says Grimm, "was the first who ventured to abbreviate her skirts. This useful invention, which gave amateurs an opportunity of passing judgment upon the nether limbs of a *danseuse*, has since been generally adopted, though, at the time, it promised to occasion a very dangerous schism. The Jansenists in the pit cried out heresy and scandal, and refused to tolerate the shortened skirts. The Molinists, on the contrary, maintained that this innovation brought us nearer

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 128.

to the spirit of the primitive Church, which objected to seeing pirouettes and gargouillades hampered by the length of the petticoats. The Sorbonne of the Opera held a great many sittings before it could decide which of the contending parties adhered to the orthodox doctrine. Finally, it pronounced in favour of the shortened skirts, but declared, at the same time, as an article of faith, that no *danseuse* should appear on the stage *sans caleçon*. This decision has since become a fundamental article of discipline, by the general consent of all the ruling powers of the Opera and of all the faithful who frequent these holy places.”<sup>1</sup>

The regulation respecting the wearing of a *caleçon* seems to have been the result of a disaster which befell a young ballerina named Mariette, who had the misfortune to have her habiliments torn away by a piece of projecting framework, “*et posa pour l'ensemble devant toute la salle, pendant une bonne minute au moins.*” There was considerable difference of opinion, Grimm tells us, as to whether Mlle. de Camargo conformed to this order, which would have interfered with her freedom of movement, and bets were freely made on the subject. But when, in order to decide these wagers, some one ventured to question the *danseuse*, the lady replied, “with a beautiful blush and her eyes modestly lowered,” that without such a “precaution” she would never have ventured to appear in public. Henceforth at the Opera the *caleçon* was known by the name of “precaution.”

In the meanwhile the triumphs of Mlle. de Camargo had begun to seriously alarm Mlle. Prévost, who not only saw her professional pre-eminence threatened by her former pupil, but had reason to fear that the dancing-

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, vi. 42.

master, Blondi, hitherto her slave, regarded the young *débutante* with a rather more than friendly interest. Perceiving that to attempt to eclipse her on the stage would only be to court certain defeat, she had recourse to intrigue. She refused to continue the lessons by which, she considered, the girl had already too greatly profited; she relegated her to small and obscure parts, in which she had no opportunity of displaying her talents, and even declined to allow her to appear in a dance in which the Duchesse de Berri had expressed a desire to see the young *danseuse*. Finally, she succeeded in banishing her to the back row of the chorus.

With so powerful and unscrupulous an enemy to contend against, poor Camargo might have remained "lost in the vulgar crowd of *filles d'Opéra*" for the rest of her days, had not a fortunate accident enabled her to assert her superiority again, and this time in a manner which it was impossible for the ruling powers of the Opera to ignore.

One evening she had to appear amid a group of demons, on whose entrance the dancer Dumoulin was to execute a *pas de seul*. The demons trooped in, and the orchestra struck up the opening bars of Dumoulin's solo; but the dancer, for some reason, did not appear. Mlle. de Camargo saved the situation. Leaving the other *figurantes*, she sprang to the middle of the stage, improvised the step of the absent Dumoulin, and danced so magnificently as to send all the spectators into transports of enthusiasm. Mlle. Prévost, beside herself with passion, vowed that she would ruin her youthful rival, but it was too late; "Terpsichore was dethroned, and Mlle. de Camargo crowned queen of the Opera."

"Yesterday," writes Adrienne Lecouvreur to one of

her friends, "they played *Roland* (an opera by Quinault and Lulli). Mlle. Prévost, although she surpassed herself, obtained very meagre applause in comparison with a new *danseuse* named Camargo, whom the public idolise, and whose great merit is youth and vigour. I doubt whether you have seen her. Mlle. Prévost protected her at first, but Blondi has fallen in love with her, and she is consequently annoyed. She appeared jealous and discontented at the applause of the public, which has now reached such a pitch of enthusiasm that the Prévost will be foolish if she does not make up her mind to retire."

Mlle. Prévost did, in fact, retire shortly after this letter was written, and Mlle. de Camargo, left mistress of the field, used her victory to such good purpose that in two years' time she had completely revolutionised the ballet. No longer did the spectators sit bored or indifferent through the languishing attitudes and mechanical gestures which composed the old ballet—that solemn ceremony in which *le Grand Monarque* and the lords and ladies of his Court had occasionally deigned to take part. "With disdainful foot she thrust into the abyss of oblivion minuet, saraband, and courant, and replaced by rapidity, agility, and lightness all the antics that had been admired before her time, but which appeared no longer endurable once one had seen her."<sup>1</sup> Yet she owed much to her teachers—to Mlle. Prévost, to Blondi, and to Dupré—and the style of dancing which she now brought into fashion seems to have been a combination of all that was best in their different methods, joined to a vivacity and piquancy entirely her own. She excelled in gavottes, rigaudons, and in all of

<sup>1</sup> Gaboriau, *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 131.



what were known as the "*grands airs*," and also in the graceful Basque dances, which she substituted for the gargouillade, judging the latter to be unsuitable for women. But her greatest triumph was a certain minuet step which she executed along the edge of the footlights, first from right to left, and then back again. "The public awaited it with impatience, watched it with intense interest, and applauded it rapturously." Many persons would come to the Opera solely to witness this performance, and leave as soon as it was over.

The prestige of Mlle. de Camargo was at this time so great that the ovations she received were not confined to the theatre. One evening, while walking in the Tuileries Gardens, she was addressed by the wife of Maréchal de Villars, who engaged her in conversation "for a good quarter of an hour." Meanwhile, all who happened to be promenading in the gardens flocked to the spot, formed a circle round the two ladies, and began to clap their hands, "as much to testify their admiration for the *danseuse*, as to show Madame de Villars how highly they approved of her affability."

Like the famous Arlequin, Dominique, Mlle. de Camargo was very gay while on the stage and very reserved and quiet the moment she had quitted it. While dancing, one of her admirers declares, she seemed "the very priestess of pleasure and of love." But no sooner had she retired into the wings, than she became "melancholy and even sad," while her countenance was "expressive of the most profound *ennui*." To her colleagues she seldom spoke, unless they happened to address her, when she responded with dignified courtesy, as became the collateral descendant of a cardinal, the

niece of a Grand Inquisitor,<sup>1</sup> and the possessor of thirty-two quarterings. However, as she was good-natured and obliging, her comrades treated the queenly airs it pleased her to assume with amused indulgence, and she was not unpopular among them.

Although, as we have mentioned, the young *danseuse* had no pretensions to beauty, she was nevertheless capable of arousing *granaes passions*, and her adorers were many. For two years, however, after her first appearance at the Opera, the "frigid dignity" of her demeanour and the unsleeping vigilance of the worthy M. de Cupis kept them at a distance, until all, save one, perceiving that their efforts were fruitless, had retired from the field. The exception was Jean Alexandre Théodose, Comte de Melun, who loved the lady with a passion which no rebuffs could extinguish, no difficulties subdue. His persistence was rewarded; Mlle. de Camargo took pity upon him, and granted him a rendezvous, which was followed by others; and, finally, one fine night, in the month of May 1728, the amorous nobleman made off with both her and her sister Sophie, aged thirteen, who also danced at the Opera, and conveyed them to his hotel in the Rue des Coutures Saint-Gervais. Sophie, it appeared, had refused to be separated from her sister, and had threatened to raise an alarm, if she were not eloped with too.

This affair caused an immense sensation; poor M. de Cupis was furious; so odious an act of violence, he con-

<sup>1</sup> "While Mlle. de Camargo delighted the Parisians with her dancing, her uncle, Don Juan, employed his time in causing Jews and sorcerers to be burned. Don Juan de Camargo, Bishop of Pampeluna, succeeded Don Diego d'Astorga y Cespedes on July 18, 1720, and was the thirty-fifth Inquisitor-General in Spain."—Castil-Blaze, *La Danse et les Ballets*, p. 196.



MADemoisELLE DE CAMARGO

From the painting by LANCRET, in the Wallace Collection, at Hertford House



sidered, justified an appeal for redress to the very highest authority in the land, and, sitting down at his desk, he forthwith indited to the Prime Minister, Cardinal de Fleury, the following eloquent petition:—

“TO HIS EMINENCE, MONSEIGNEUR LE CARDINAL  
DE FLEURY

“MONSEIGNEUR,—Ferdinand Joseph de Cupis, *alias* Camargo, *écuyer*, seigneur de Renoussart, represents with the deepest respect to Your Eminence, that, descended from one of the noblest families of Rome, which has given to the Roman Church an Archbishop of Trani, a Bishop of Ostia, and a Cardinal with the title of Saint-John *ante Portam Latinam*, doyen of the Sacred College, in the year 1577, under the pontificate of Leo X., and finding himself deprived of means, by the misfortunes, the lawsuits, and the ravages of war which his fathers had experienced, he avoided with more care than death anything derogatory to his birth and his ancestors, in whose nobility there has never been any change, not even through alliances, the petitioner being in a position to prove sixteen quarterings on both his father and mother's side, since the family of Cupis quitted Rome. . . .

“Unable to maintain his rank, and burdened with seven children, he has sighed, yet without murmuring, against his lot. He has striven to develop the different talents of his children, and to instruct them in those liberal arts which might enable them, without derogating from their birth, to supply the needs of life and escape from want, while awaiting more prosperous days. One he has had instructed in music, others in painting, and others again in dancing. Among the last, there are two girls, now aged eighteen and thirteen years respectively.

“As the late King, of glorious memory, decreed that any one might be connected with the Opera without loss of dignity, the petitioner, having been persuaded and even constrained by persons who had perceived the great talents of the elder, could not refuse his consent to their entering the Opera, although on condition that either he or his wife should conduct them thither, and, in like manner, resume charge of them at the conclusion of each performance. In short, the elder, who has now performed for three years,<sup>1</sup> has always behaved with perfect propriety, and this conduct has been as universally admired as her dancing.

“But, for the last three years, M. le Comte de Melun has had recourse to the arts of seduction and of methods alike unworthy of himself and of the petitioner. . . . He dared to propose to the petitioner that he should be a consenting party to his daughter's dishonour, in return for which he offered to surrender to him the salary which she received at the Opera. The petitioner, having treated such a proposition as it deserved, the count found means to introduce himself, on several nights, into his daughters' apartment, and, finally, on the night of the 10th to 11th of the month of May, he carried them both off, and, at this moment, retains them at his hôtel in Paris, Rue de la Couture Saint-Gervais (*sic*).

“The petitioner, thus dishonoured no less than his daughters, would have taken proceedings in the ordinary way, if the ravisher had been a private individual; and the laws established by his Majesty and his august predecessors provide that abduction should be punished

<sup>1</sup> This is no doubt a slip of the pen. Mlle. de Camargo had only been two years on the Paris stage.

with death. It is a double crime. Two sisters are carried off, aged respectively eighteen and thirteen years.

“But the petitioner, having to deal with a person of the rank of the Comte de Melun, is obliged to have recourse to the maker of the laws, and trusts that the King in his bounty will see that he has justice, and will command the Comte de Melun to espouse the elder daughter of the petitioner and to furnish the younger with a dowry.

“In no other way can he make reparation for so terrible an outrage.”<sup>1</sup>

The only effect the recital of the noble dancing-master’s wrongs produced on the Cardinal seems to have been one of amusement; and, though, a week later, Mlle. Sophie returned to her indignant father, the elder sister, whom the rules of the Opera emancipated from parental control, remained at the Comte de Melun’s hôtel. That nobleman, however, did not long enjoy a monopoly of the lady’s favours, while her extravagance annoyed as much as it astonished him. He therefore secured to her an income of 1500 livres, and courteously intimated that they must part.

The notorious Duc de Richelieu, who regarded himself as the principal cause of the ballerina’s rupture with Melun, and desired to make amends, took the count’s place; to be, in his turn, succeeded by the Marquis de Sourdis, for whom Mlle. de Camargo is said to have conceived “*une belle passion*.” The marquis’s predilection for the ladies of the Opera had already

<sup>1</sup> *Revue rétrospective*, Série I. tom. I. (1833), p. 401. The original letter was, at this time, in the possession of Beffara.

made serious inroads on his patrimony; but this did not prevent him from lavishing the most costly presents upon his inamorata. Before, however, he had succeeded in quite ruining himself, he was confronted by a rival whose pretensions it was impossible for him to oppose.

The rival in question was a Prince of the Blood, Louis de Bourbon, Comte de Clermont, third son of Louis III. of that name and Mlle. de Nantes, legitimated daughter of *le Grand Monarque* and Madame de Montespan. Born in 1709 and destined for the Church, or, more strictly speaking, for the emoluments thereof, he had been tonsured in infancy and loaded with benefices. Before he had completed his eighth year, he found himself in possession of the revenues of the rich abbey of Bec-Hellouin, in Normandy, to which by the summer of 1733, the date when he made Mlle. de Camargo's acquaintance, had been added some half-dozen others, with an aggregate income of over 200,000 livres.

A curious figure was this descendant of the Great Condé; "*moitié plumet, moitié rabat*," monk by profession and soldier by choice; "owing two million livres in Paris and changing his mistress every day"; now regulating the affairs of one of his abbeys, now scandalising the devout by some *liaison* with Opera girl or courtesan, anon distinguishing himself in battle; witty, affable, generous, brave, magnificent in his pleasures, and a lover and patron of literature; the only prince of his house then living in whom could be traced a resemblance to their illustrious ancestor.

Mlle. de Camargo had by this time acquired the reputation of being a somewhat expensive luxury, even for a prince. Accordingly, before "taking her into his service," the count-abbé desired to rid himself of two



other ladies, both of whom had claims upon his attention and his purse. One was the Duchesse de Bouillon, poor Adrienne Lecouvreur's enemy; the other, a siren of humble birth, named Quoniam, with whom he had carried on an intermittent *liaison* since he was sixteen. On the principle that exchange is no robbery, it was arranged that the duchess and the Marquis de Sourdis should console each other; while Clermont experienced but little difficulty in persuading his nephew, the Prince de Conti, a promising young gentleman of seventeen, to take Mlle. Quoniam off his hands. The latter arrangement led to much unpleasantness in high circles, for the Prince de Conti had two years before taken unto himself a wife, in the person of Mlle. de Chartres, daughter of the late Regent and sister of the devout Duc d'Orléans. The duke and his mother, the dowager-duchess, were furious, and it was rumoured that they had obtained a *lettre de cachet*, in virtue of which Mlle. Quoniam had been spirited away to a convent. "This news," writes Barbier in his *Journal*, "was general in the fashionable world; however, it is not true. On Sunday, August 5, Mlle. Quoniam went to the Opera and took a seat in a box. So soon as the young men in the pit caught sight of her, they clapped their hands to show how delighted the public were to find that the rumour was unfounded. In the evening, she went to the Tuileries. All the princesses of the House of Condé were there, which caused the people to form themselves into two lines as they passed by. They did the same for Mlle. Quoniam, and congratulated her by their gestures."<sup>1</sup>

With the Comte de Clermont, Mlle. de Camargo

<sup>1</sup> *Journal de Barbier*, ii. 416.

reached the highest point of her fortunes. Her lover could refuse her nothing. When his monastic revenues proved inadequate to satisfy her caprices, he ran into debt, and when his credit was exhausted, he had recourse to stratagems to obtain money from his mother. The Duchesse de Bourbon, having promised to settle the claims of some of his most clamorous creditors, the count instructed his steward, Moncrif, the Academician, to make out a statement showing a total liability of 80,000 livres, whereas the debts in question did not amount to much more than half that sum. The balance he was to remit to Mlle. de Camargo with his Highness's compliments. Moncrif, however, fearing the consequences to himself should the duchess ever discover the trick which had been played her, revealed the plot to the old lady, and so the ballerina never got the money. As for the steward, he was promptly dismissed "for having abused his master's confidence."

Such was the count's infatuation for his erdhantress that he was "even jealous of the pleasure which the public shared with him in seeing her dance," and, in 1736, insisted on her quitting the Opera, to the despair of all Paris. If we are to credit a report drawn up many years later by the Police-Inspector Meusnier, for the edification of Madame de Pompadour, "his passion tyrannised even over the quarter where she resided, so that the neighbours did not dare to show themselves at their windows or to glance in the direction of the Camargo's house."<sup>1</sup>

In July 1737, the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, with an annual revenue of 160,000 livres, became vacant, by the death of old Cardinal de Bissy. The Comte de Clermont had long had a covetous eye upon this rich

<sup>1</sup> She was then living in the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs.

prize, and a substantial addition to his income was imperatively needed, as Mlle. de Camargo's extravagance had reduced him to such straits that, in the previous December, he had been forced to sell his duchy of Châteauroux to Louis XV., who, some years later, conferred it on his mistress, Madame de la Tournelle. Deeming, however, that, under the circumstances, some concession to public opinion might be advisable, he counterfeited a fit of devotion, separated from his mistress, who, on a sudden, disappeared from Paris, and caused a report to be circulated that she had been imprisoned by order of the King in Sainte-Pélagie. No sooner, however, had the coveted abbey been conferred upon him, than Mlle. de Camargo reappeared upon the scene, and went to do the honours of the Château de Berny, a charming country-house situated two leagues from Paris, on the road to Orléans, which had been acquired by the monks of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in 1686, with the price of the lands which they had ceded to Louis XIV. for the enlargement of the park of Versailles.

At Berny, Clermont erected a private theatre, upon whose stage the fair châtelaine, we may presume, occasionally condescended to appear, though Gaboriau is indebted to his imagination for the statement that she was in the habit of dancing "*pour la plus grande joie des moines ravis*,"<sup>1</sup> as the château was the private residence of the abbot, to which his subordinates were never admitted. If they desired to see their superior on business connected with the abbey, they had to present themselves at his hôtel in the Rue de Richelieu.

Mlle. de Camargo presided over the Château of Berny

<sup>1</sup> *Les Comédiennes adorées*, p. 144.

for some four years, when an obscure *figurante* of the Opera, Mlle. Le Duc by name, "a creature without intelligence, without manners, without principles, without a soul,"<sup>1</sup> stole away the heart of the Comte de Clermont. Mlle. Le Duc was the property of Président de Rieux, son of the celebrated financier, Samuel Bernard, who, having purchased the lady's affections at a great price, was naturally reluctant to surrender them. To oppose himself to a Prince of the Blood in an affair of such importance was more, however, than he had the courage to do; and so, one day, while the president was dispensing justice in the Cour des Enquêtes, Mlle. Le Duc bade farewell to the luxurious nest which the luckless judge had furnished for her, and transferred herself and her belongings to Berny.

Henceforth, the president lived only for revenge, and racked his brains to discover some means whereby he might humble the pride of the Comte de Clermont, and make the faithless Le Duc bitterly rue the day on which she had so basely betrayed him. At length, he resolved upon the following plan of campaign: he would invite Mlle. de Camargo to occupy the vacant place in his affections, and surround her with such luxury, array her in such toilettes, load her with such presents as would cause Mlle. Le Duc to die of envy, and her monkish lover to gnaw his fingers with vexation. He accordingly made overtures to the deserted ballerina, which were promptly accepted; and one morning all Paris was talking of the

<sup>1</sup> Collé, *Journal* (edit. 1868), i. 317. We fear that Collé, who is very severe upon the lady, is hardly an impartial witness, as elsewhere, in his *Journal*, we read that Mlle. le Duc "meddled with everything, and prevented the Count using his influence except on behalf of herself and her base vassals." As the dramatist was a *protégé* of Clermont, this would seem to point to some private grievance against her.

magnificent generosity of the Président de Rieux, who had sent his new mistress a chastely-wrought bowl of solid gold, filled to the brim with double louis.

The Comte de Clermont heard of the president's gift, and hastened to accept the challenge. In the *Journal de Police*, under date March 1742, we read :—

“ On Thursday, March 22, 1742, the Demoiselle Le Duc, formerly mistress of the Président de Rieux, drove to the *Tenebrae* at Longchamps<sup>1</sup> in a *calèche* of cane painted blue, with all the chains of silver, drawn by six ponies no bigger than dogs, ridden by a little postilion and a little hussar, the first in a red waistcoat all galooned with silver, and with a blue plume in his hat ; the other in a blue tunic, with his sabre and cap decorated with *plaques* of silver. The Le Duc held the horses' reins, and was escorted by two footmen.

“ This luxurious equipage was a gallantry of the Comte de Clermont, Abbé of Saint-Germain, to flatter the vanity of the Le Duc, who occupies the post of his favourite sultana, which the Camargo enjoyed up to the end of the year 1741.

“ The goddess of the fête responded to this magnificent gallantry by attire still richer and more elegant, of blue and silver ; she had for companions in her *calèche* her sister and the Cartou.<sup>2</sup> A number of other actresses filled three coaches in the suite of Madame l'Abbesse, and wore her colours of blue and silver.

“ All the people at Longchamps, on horseback, in

<sup>1</sup> The *Tenebrae* service at the Abbey of Longchamps on Wednesdays and Thursdays in Holy Week was a fashionable function at this period. Its popularity dated from 1727, when the famous singer, Mlle. Lemaure, took the veil, and transferred her services from the stage of the Opera to the abbey choir.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 180, *note, supra*.

coaches, or in *calèches*, formed a procession in the rear of this troupe of vestals, through curiosity or for the sake of amusement. . . .

"Jests and songs at the expense of the Comte de Clermont have not been wanting, and the King has intimated to him that he is displeased and scandalised.

"Here is a placard which has been composed on the matter :—

"THE

"TRIUMPH OF VICE

"At the Theatre of Longchamps,

"By Mlle. Le Duc.

"*The first representation given on Holy Wednesday, March 21.  
On Friday the Theatre will be closed.*"<sup>1</sup>

The duel between the abbé and the judge and their respective sultanas continued until both gentlemen were nearly ruined; but victory ultimately rested with the Church, as Mlle. de Camargo and the Président de Rieux soon grew tired of one another and agreed to separate, the latter making the ballerina a present of 40,000 crowns out of what was left of his fortune. After this adventure, according to the report drawn up by Meusnier, of which we have already spoken, Mlle. de Camargo's old inclination for the Marquis de Sourdis revived and they resumed their interrupted *liaison*. Their respective positions were now, however, reversed, as the Marquis had fallen on evil days, and become so poor that his mistress had to pledge her earrings and necklace to enable him to live in a manner befitting his rank.

In the meanwhile, the *danseuse* had returned to the

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Jules Cousin, *Le Comte de Clermont, sa cour et ses maîtresses*.

Opera, where she, of course, met with an enthusiastic reception.

“Légère et forte en sa souplesse,  
La vive Camargo sautait,”

wrote Voltaire. Nevertheless, she had now to be content with a divided empire. During her long absence, a new star had arisen, in the person of a Mlle. Sallé, with whom the Camargo had henceforth to share the applause of the public and the praises of the poets. Mlle. Sallé's style of dancing differed widely from that of her celebrated rival. Whereas the latter danced with astonishing rapidity and rose so high from the stage that “it seemed as if she were going to touch the friezes,” Mlle. Sallé danced slowly and with the minimum of exertion, relying for effect upon grace of movement and voluptuous poses.

The rivalry between the two stars was very bitter, and all attempts to promote a better understanding proved fruitless, although Voltaire himself intervened, and addressed to the ladies some graceful lines, in which he adroitly divided his praises between them:—

“Ah ! Camargo, que vous êtes brillante !  
Mais que Sallé, grands dieux ! est ravissante !  
Que vos pas sont légers, et que les siens sont doux !  
Elle est inimitable et vous êtes nouvelle.  
Les Nymphes sautent comme vous,  
Et les Grâces dansent comme elle.”

In spite of the rivalry of Mlle. Sallé, the fame of the elder ballerina was still sufficient to have satisfied a less exacting artiste. An air to which she danced in the first act of *Pyramé et Thisbé* excited such enthusiasm that it became the vogue of the salons, first, as a song,

and, later, as a dance, which was called after the *danseuse*, the "Camargo," and by that name was still known a century later.

Her triumphs in the dance encouraged Mlle. de Camargo to tempt fortune in another *emploi*, and, in an opera called *Les Talents lyriques*, she accordingly made her *début* as a singer. She had a very pretty voice, and was much applauded; but, for some reason, did not repeat the experiment.

At the age of forty-one, conscious that she no longer possessed the "*souplesse forte et légère*," which Voltaire had once celebrated, Mlle. de Camargo decided to retire, and, at Easter 1751, quitted the scene of her many triumphs, never to return. Her popularity had endured to the last, for Casanova, who saw her dance some months earlier, declares that the public applauded her "with a kind of frenzy."

On her retirement, she received a pension of 1500 livres, instead of the usual 1000, and another pension of a like amount from the King. She had, however, little need of such assistance, as, more prudent than most of her colleagues, she had found secure investments for a considerable portion of the sums which her various admirers had lavished upon her; while, if Meusnier is correct, she was in receipt of an annual allowance of 12,000 livres from the Comte de Clermont, which would have been materially increased, but for the interference of Mlle. Le Duc.

Henceforth she ceased to interest the town. In 1753, we learn that she has taken unto herself another impecunious lover, a certain Chevalier de la Guérché, "who lived with her, and the whole of whose expenses she defrayed," after which we hear no more of her until



the chroniclers record her death, which took place on April 28, 1770, at the age of sixty. She was then living in the Rue Saint-Honoré, "like a respectable bourgeoise, very assiduous in visiting the poor of her parish, and always surrounded by a dozen dogs, to whom she was much attached." She was nursed in her last illness by the widow of François Boucher, the famous painter.

The best-known portrait of Mlle. de Camargo is that by Lancret, in the Wallace Collection, at Hertford House. An original repetition of this portrait, with a marked variation in the colour scheme, is in the Museum at Nantes. The Neues Palais at Potsdam contains another portrait by Lancret, entitled *La Camargo avec son danseur*, which shows the ballerina in the act of executing a *pas de deux* with a male dancer.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue of the Wallace Collection.



V

JUSTINE FAVART



## V

### JUSTINE FAVART

TOWARDS the end of the reign of Louis XIV., there lived in the Rue de la Verrerie, in Paris, a pastry-cook named Charles Paul Favart. No ordinary pastry-cook was Charles Paul; he was a man of parts and a poet; but a poet of an unusually practical turn of mind, inasmuch as, instead of contributing sonnets to the *Mercure*, he was in the habit of utilising his talent to advertise the excellence of his wares, with the result that his buns<sup>1</sup> and cakes were famed throughout the length and breadth of Paris.

The enterprising pastry-cook might have amassed a comfortable fortune, had he been content with the profits of his trade. But, unhappily, he became involved in the craze for speculating in Mississippi stock; and, on his death, his wife and two children found themselves almost unprovided for. The eldest of these children, a boy named Charles Simon, who had inherited the paternal turn for verses, was at this time pursuing his studies at the famous college of Louis-le-Grand, where he had already gained some little distinction. Forced to abandon the cultivation of the Muses to take charge of his father's business, which,

<sup>1</sup> Favart is said to have claimed that he had invented the bun. But, as several learned writers assert that it was in vogue in the time of the Crusades, he probably only meant that he had perfected it. See Desnoiresterres, *Épicuriens et Lettrés*, p. 182.

though burdened with debt, still remained to them, he nevertheless contrived, in the intervals of making pastry, to compose a poem on *La France délivrée par la pucelle d'Orléans*, which, in 1733, was awarded the prize of the Académie des Jeux Floraux. He had already, in collaboration with another young poet, written a piece called *Polinchinelle, comte de Paonfier*, performed at the Fair of Saint-Germain; and, in the following year, he submitted to the Opéra-Comique a vaudeville, entitled *Les Deux Jumelles*, which was produced on March 22, and met with a very favourable reception.

Next day, while Favart, girt with his apron, his shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbow, a square cap on his head, and a larding-pin in his hand, was working in his shop in the Rue de la Verrerie, a coach drove up to the door, out of which stepped an elderly gentleman, very richly dressed, who inquired for M. Favart, the author of *Les Deux Jumelles*. Poor Favart, ashamed for the moment of revealing his identity, replied that he would go and summon him, and, running up to his bedroom, hastily removed the signs of his trade, rolled down his shirt-sleeves, donned his best coat, and returned to the shop to greet his amused visitor.

The latter, it transpired, was a wealthy farmer-general,<sup>1</sup> who had a fancy for playing the part of Mæcnas. He had been present at the performance at the Opéra-Comique, the previous evening, and had been so charmed with the piece that he had made inquiries concerning its author, and, on learning that he was a young man without means of his own, had resolved

<sup>1</sup> We are not told the name of the farmer-general. In Favart's *Mémoires* he is referred to merely as M. B\*\*\*.

to offer him his protection. "I have myself," said he, "been on bad terms with Fortune; but she has ended by caressing me, and I find no better way of using her favours than to employ them to the advantage of the arts and literature."

Thanks to the assistance of the generous financier, Favart was enabled to relinquish his business and devote himself entirely to play-writing. In the course of the next few years, he provided the lesser theatres with more than a score of pieces, one of which, *La Chercheuse d'esprit*, played at the Opéra-Comique, in 1741, met with extraordinary success. Up to this time, Favart's pieces had appeared anonymously, but, encouraged by the enthusiastic reception accorded to the play in question, he now decided to emerge from his shell, and, in accordance with this resolution, gave a dinner to some of the most noted *beaux esprits* and authors of the time. Among those present was Crébillon *père*, who received, with his invitation, a delicate specimen of the dramatist's culinary skill, an attention which he acknowledged by the following quatrain:—

"Il est un auteur en crédit,  
Dont la muse a le don de plaire :  
Il fit la *Chercheuse d'esprit*,  
Il n'en chercha point pour la faire."

Towards the end of the year 1744, Favart was entrusted by the director of the Opera, of which the Opéra-Comique was a dependency, with the management of the latter theatre; and it was while occupying this post that an incident occurred which was to be the starting-point of some very surprising adventures.

One day, in the following January, Favart received

a letter from a lady at Lunéville, soliciting for her daughter an engagement at the Opéra-Comique as singer and dancer. The writer of the letter was a certain Madame Duronceray, the wife of one of the musicians of the chapel of Stanislaus Leczinski, ex-King of Poland, to which she herself was attached. The daughter on whose behalf she wrote, Marie Justine-Benoîte Duronceray, was, it appeared, now in her eighteenth year, had been educated by the most skilful masters, under the personal supervision of King Stanislaus himself, and, to judge from the fond mother's letter, was a perfect little prodigy, who united in her person every imaginable accomplishment.

The director returned an encouraging answer, and the two ladies, having obtained the necessary leave of absence from the King, started for Paris, and, on their arrival, lost no time in presenting themselves at Favart's house.

The result of the interview proved that Madame Duronceray had not exaggerated her daughter's talents. As actress, singer, and dancer, the girl showed remarkable promise, while she was as charming as she was accomplished.<sup>1</sup> A very brief examination sufficed to assure Favart that he had discovered a most valuable acquisition to his troupe; and it was at once arranged that Mlle. Chantilly, as Justine had decided to call herself, out of deference for a branch of the Duronceray family which lived in Paris and might conceivably have

<sup>1</sup> Justine's portraits, the most pleasing of which is perhaps Flipart's engraving of the drawing by Charles Nicolas Cochin *fls*, reproduced in this volume, show us a pretty and vivacious-looking young woman, but with features somewhat too irregular for beauty. It is probable, however, that the attraction which she possessed for her contemporaries was, like that of Mlle. Molière, of the kind in which Nature plays the lesser part, and the desire to please the greater.



taken umbrage at one of their name appearing on the stage, should make her *début* in a piece from Favart's own pen, which he was then writing, in celebration of the approaching marriage of the Dauphin with the Infanta Maria Theresa. The title of this vaudeville, *Les Fêtes publiques*, has alone come down to us; but, whatever its merits may have been, it was highly successful, the new actress's piquant beauty and grace, no less than her vocal and dramatic talents, being loudly acclaimed by a succession of crowded houses.

The charms of Justine had already made a deep impression upon Favart, and, after her triumph in *Les Fêtes publiques*, he became so deeply in love with the fair *débutante* that he declared his passion, which the young lady was pleased to reciprocate. An honest and excellent man, Favart did not attempt to take advantage of their respective positions,<sup>1</sup> but offered to make her his

<sup>1</sup> A document found in the Bastille on its capture in July 1789, written by one Meusnier, an inspector of police who was employed by Maurice de Saxe in his persecution of the Favarts, and published the same year, under the title of *Manuscrit trouvé à la Bastille (signé Meusnier) concernant deux lettres-de-cachet lâchées contre Mlle. de Chantilly et M. Favart par le Maréchal de Saxe*, asserts that for some time Justine lived with Favart, as his mistress, in a house in the Rue de Buci. But in the opinion of Desnoiresterres, the best informed of the poet's biographers, this charge is sufficiently controverted by the following letter written by Favart to his *fiancée*: "Take care of your health; remember that mine is involved in it. You will take more care of yourself, if you have any regard for me, who love you more than life; though do not take offence, for my very sentiments are your eulogy. Your talents seduce me, but your virtue binds me. If your thoughts were in contradiction to your actions, you would be worthy neither of my esteem nor my love. . . . I am speaking to you against the interests of my heart; but I, at the same time, prove to you that I am the sincerest and the best of your friends."—Favart, *Mémoires et correspondance littéraire* (edit. 1808), i. 20. Desnoiresterres, *Épicuriens et Lettrés*, p. 196 et seq.

wife; and, on December 12, 1745, they were married at the Church of Saint-Pierre-aux-Bœufs, a little church generally patronised by persons who wished to keep their marriages secret for a while, in the presence of only the necessary witnesses.

In view of what we shall presently relate, it is important to note that M. Duronceray, Justine's father, was not present at the ceremony, although he had given the required consent to his daughter's marriage, in writing.

The marriage took place under very inauspicious circumstances. The vogue that Favart by his operas and Justine by her singing and acting had obtained for the Opéra-Comique had aroused the jealousy of the Théâtre-Français and the Comédie-Italienne; and, in the autumn of 1745, they solicited and obtained its suppression. The severity of this measure was somewhat mitigated by the permission which Favart received to open a theatre at the Fair of Saint-Laurent, whither he transferred his company, and presented, among other pieces, a pantomime, entitled *Les Vendanges de Tempé*, of which the success was assured by the charming acting of Justine. This privilege, however, was only accorded him for a very short time, with the object of allowing the troupe of the Opéra-Comique leisure to make other arrangements, and, on its withdrawal, Favart and his colleagues found themselves in a very embarrassing situation; and matters must have gone hardly with them, had not the poet had the good fortune to find a protector as powerful as he was unexpected.

It happened that some little time before the suppression of the Opéra-Comique, Favart had met at the house

of one of those leaders of the fashionable world whose whim it was to patronise actors and men of letters, Maurice de Saxe, now become the greatest soldier of his age, *Maréchal de France*, and “general-in-chief of all the armies of the King.” Maurice, who was as enthusiastic a patron of the drama as he had been in the days of poor Adrienne Lecouvreur, was followed in his campaigns by a troupe of actors, which gave performances wherever the army happened to be quartered, sometimes in a regular theatre, sometimes in an improvised one; and he now suggested to Favart that he should organise a second troupe and accompany him to Flanders for the campaign which was about to open.

The offer seemed like a fortune to poor Favart, in the state of poverty and uncertainty to which he was then reduced; nevertheless, he hesitated to accept it, pointing out that the formation of a second company might be regarded by the troupe already in existence as an encroachment on its privileges, and that its leader—one Parmentier, an arrogant and unscrupulous person, with whom Favart was by no means anxious to enter into competition—would be sure to throw obstacles in his way. The Marshal, however, solved the difficulty by promising to transfer the Parmentier troupe to the division of the army commanded by *Maréchal Löwendal*, and attach Favart’s company to his own person; and, under these conditions, the poet gratefully accepted his offer.

Here are the terms in which the Marshal announced his appointment to Favart, and, at the same time, informed him of what was expected of him:—

“The favourable report that has been made to me

about you, Monsieur, has induced me to choose you, in preference to all others, in order to give you the exclusive management of my comedy company. I am persuaded that you will use every endeavour to ensure its success; but do not imagine that I look upon it merely as an object of amusement; it enters into my political views and into the plan of my military operations. I will advise you what you will have to do in this respect when occasion arises, and, in the meanwhile, I count upon your discretion and punctuality. You are from this moment at liberty to make all your arrangements for opening your theatre at Brussels, in the month of April next."

As there was but little time at his disposal, Favart started at once for Brussels, where he obtained a lease of the Grand Theatre in the Rue de la Monnaie. Then he returned to Paris, and, having selected his company, which comprised all the best artistes of the deceased Opéra-Comique, he and Justine set out for Flanders.

Two days after their arrival in Brussels, Maurice de Saxe made his entry into the city. The excitement was intense; an enormous crowd lined the streets through which the procession was to pass; while the windows, and even the roofs of the houses, were thronged with spectators eager to catch a glimpse of the famous general. The weather, however, was unfavourable for a public ceremony; a storm was brewing, and, as the Marshal reached the Hôtel de Ville, where all the fair ladies of Brussels had congregated to receive him, a terrific peal of thunder was heard. Many persons no doubt saw in this an omen of evil for the hitherto all-conquering warrior; but Favart chose to regard

it far differently, and forthwith improvised the following verses :—

“Est-ce là notre général  
Que ramène Bellone ?  
—Eh ! oui, c'est ce grand maréchal,  
C'est lui-même en personne.  
—Non ; je le vois à ses regards,  
C'est le Dieu de la guerre,  
Et Jupiter annonce Mars  
Par un coup de tonnerre.”

Copies of these verses were printed and circulated everywhere ; and the Marshal, having had his attention drawn to them, as he was sitting down to dinner with his general officers, sent for the writer and complimented him upon them. One of the officers present, who did not share his chief's passion for the theatre, asked Favart of what use a poet like himself could be to the army. “To celebrate the exploits of our warriors and satirise the enemy,” was the prompt reply, and the questioner proceeded no further.

During the afternoon, apparently at the request of some of the ladies of the city, the Marshal gave orders that part of the troops should be paraded in front of the Hôtel de Ville and put through various evolutions. One of the corps selected was a contingent of Jacobite Highlanders, “who, in changing their country, had not thought it necessary to change their costume.” The scantiness of the gallant Scotsmen's attire, Favart tells us, greatly shocked the Brussels ladies, to the intense amusement of the Marshal and his officers. In the evening, Favart's company gave their first performance, which was so well received as to remove all doubt as to the success of their enterprise.

Although Brussels was the centre of the Marshal's operations, and Favart had secured a lease of the Grand Theatre, the terms of his engagement obliged him to follow the army into the field, a necessity which involved him and his company in many hardships and privations. Once Favart passed three days and three nights without sleep, except such as he could obtain leaning against a tree, with his feet in water. Often provisions ran short; bread sold at fifteen sous the pound, and sometimes the unfortunate actors were nearly starving. Nor were dangers of an even more alarming kind wanting. The country swarmed with the irregular cavalry of the enemy, who intercepted convoys, cut off stragglers, and burned and pillaged to within musket-shot of the French lines. Neither age nor sex was sacred to these Croats and Pandours. A luckless troupe of actors on their way from Brussels to Cologne, to fulfil an engagement at the Elector's Court, was surprised by a body of these marauders and robbed of everything they possessed, with the exception of their theatrical costumes, in which they were compelled to trudge to Louvain, their woe-begone countenances contrasting oddly with the gay habiliments of Arlequin, Scaramouche, and the rest. Maurice de Saxe had granted Favart's company an escort of thirty men of the Régiment de Septimanie; but this force was insufficient to secure them from molestation. One day, while passing through some wooded country between Louvain and Indioigne, they were attacked by a body of hussars, who outnumbered their little escort by as many as four to one. A sanguinary hand-to-hand conflict ensued, for the marauders were as brave as they were ruthless, while their excesses had exasperated the French to the last degree. Twice

the hussars were beaten back, and, at length, reinforcements arriving for the defenders, they drew off, leaving, however, only six of the gallant escort alive, the least wounded of whom had received four sabre cuts. Favart, in a letter to his mother giving an account of this adventure, speaks with admiration of the conduct of this soldier: "Never did I see a man of such courage. He was covered with blood, which he was losing in abundance, and yet would not permit his comrades to give a thought to him until the combat was over. Then, in order to speak, he was obliged to hold up his nose and a portion of his cheek, which had been separated from the rest of his countenance by a sabre cut, and had fallen down over his mouth!"

To compensate the Favarts for the hardships and perils they were compelled to undergo, Maurice de Saxe treated them with the greatest kindness; in fact, presents were simply showered upon them. On one occasion, we find him sending them three fine horses to draw their coach; on another, "a camp-bed of red satin"; on a third, twenty-five bottles of Hungarian wine. Moreover, he gave Favart to understand that he might draw upon him freely in case of necessity, and protected him against the attacks of the jealous Parmentier, the leader of the other troupe of actors, who, not without some cause, regarded Favart as a rival, and did all in his power to annoy and discredit him. The simple-minded poet, who had as yet no suspicion as to the real object of the Marshal's attentions, seems to have been under the impression that they were intended as tributes to his literary and dramatic talents, and, in his letters to his mother, waxes quite enthusiastic over his patron's kindness and generosity.

The Marshal, in engaging Favart's services, had told him that he regarded the troupe which followed his army as something more than a means of amusement, and that it "entered into the plan of his military operations." M. Léon Gozlan makes merry over this letter, which, he thinks, was written merely to flatter the poet's vanity, and lure him and his wife to Flanders;<sup>1</sup> but there can be no doubt that Maurice did attach considerable importance to the provision of such entertainments for those under his command. In the first place, they served to occupy not a little of the time which would otherwise be employed in more doubtful pleasures, particularly play, which, in spite of stringent prohibitions, was very prevalent in the army among all ranks, and had a most disastrous effect on the morale of the troops, causing the officers to gamble away their pay and the men their rations, and leading to frequent quarrels and much ill-feeling. In the second place, the Marshal's knowledge of the French character had taught him that a happy *couplet de circonstance* sung to a lively air often had more effect upon the soldiers than the most eloquent of harangues. An anecdote celebrated in the history of this campaign will show how accurately the great commander had gauged the spirit of his troops.

In the autumn of 1746, the French, after capturing Namur, had occupied Tongres, in the market-place of which Favart had constructed a theatre. The allied army, under Prince Charles of Lorraine, was close at hand, and a decisive engagement was daily expected; but this did not prevent the improvised playhouse from being crowded every evening. Early in the afternoon of October 9, the Marshal sent for Favart to come to

<sup>1</sup> *Madame Favart et le Maréchal de Saxe.*



his quarters, and, on his arrival, dismissed the officers who were with him, and, turning to the poet, said : "To-morrow I shall give battle. As yet I have issued no orders to that effect. Announce it this evening at the conclusion of the performance, in couplets suitable to the occasion. Until that moment let nothing transpire."

Favart obeyed, and composed the following verses, which were sung by a young and pretty actress between the two pieces of which the performance consisted :—

" Nous avons rempli notre tâche,  
Demain nous donnerons relâche ;  
Guerriers, Mars va guider vos pas ;  
Que votre ardeur se renouvelle :  
A des intrépides soldats  
La Victoire est toujours fidèle.

" Demain bataille, jour de gloire ;  
Que dans les fastes de l'histoire  
Triomphe encore le nom français  
Digne d'éternelle mémoire !  
Revenez après vos succès,  
Jouer des fruits de la victoire."

These verses caused the most unbounded astonishment. It was at first supposed that the poet had lost his head ; a battle announced between two comic operas, the order of the day to the air of a popular song, seemed too absurd ! Officers hastened to the Marshal's box to inquire if Favart had had any authority for his announcement ; but Maurice smilingly replied that he had acted under his orders. Thereupon the astonishment changed to enthusiasm, and the theatre resounded with applause. "On all sides," writes Favart, "but two words were heard : '*Demain, bataille ! demain,*

*bataille !*' The intoxication passed rapidly from officers to men, and was so intense that one could not fail to see therein a presage of victory."<sup>1</sup>

The battle so eagerly anticipated did not take place next day, but on October 11, when Maurice attacked the allies at Roucoux, a little to the north of Liège, and completely defeated them, though the English, who, as usual, bore the brunt of the engagement, fought right valiantly, and the victory was in consequence very dearly purchased.

In celebration of his compatriots' triumph, Favart, on the morrow of the battle, hurriedly composed two or three scenes full of happy allusions to the events of the preceding day. These were performed the same night, and were, of course, received with enthusiasm. He did not confine himself, he tells us, to chanting the praises of the victors, but paid a generous tribute to the courage of the vanquished, one of his couplets concluding thus:—

“ Anglais chéris de la victoire  
 Vous ne cédez qu'aux seuls Français ;  
 Vous n'en avez pas moins de gloire.”

The victory of Roucoux concluded the campaign of that year, and Favart and his company returned to Brussels, heartily thankful to be quit, for a time, of war's alarms. “I prefer,” he wrote to his mother, “moderate profits with safety to a large fortune purchased by continual fear and danger.” However, he had no reason to be dissatisfied with his winter season in the Belgian capital, which was indeed successful beyond his most sanguine anticipations, the profits at

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires et Correspondance* (edit. 1808), i. 25.

each performance averaging as much as six hundred livres. To add to his good fortune, he was able to rid himself of his rival Parmentier, who, finding that the Marshal had taken Favart definitely under his protection, and that all attempts to oust him were likely to prove abortive, retired in disgust, leaving the poet master of the field. The future now presented itself to Favart in the most smiling colours; but alas! the poor man was living all the while in a fool's paradise, from which he was soon destined to be very rudely ejected.

Though now in his fiftieth year, Maurice de Saxe was still as susceptible to feminine charms as in the days when he had wrought such havoc among the ladies of Lithuania and Courland. If the record of his gallantries did not equal those of his royal father, it was probably because his military occupations absorbed so large a portion of his time. His tastes, particularly where the theatre was concerned, were catholic. "Whom did he not love? To what actress or opera-girl's skirts was he not attached? All the actresses of his campaigns in Flanders succeeded one another in that inflammable heart and disputed there an ephemeral reign: Mlles. Darimattes, Fleury, Amand, Verrières,<sup>1</sup> Blin, Auguste, and Beaumenard. For the Saxon hero, the troupe which he caused to follow him was a seraglio, in which the last comers were the most honoured."<sup>2</sup>

Upon the susceptible Marshal it was only to be expected that the fresh beauty and grace of Justine should make a favourable impression, nor was his admiration for the young lady by any means diminished by

<sup>1</sup> Marie Rinteau, the great-grandmother of George Sand.

<sup>2</sup> Deanoiresterres, *Épicuriens et Lettrés*, p. 215.

the fact that—to borrow his own curious expression—she was “possessed by the demon of conjugal love,”<sup>1</sup> and, therefore, unlikely to afford him an easy conquest. M. Léon Gozlan asserts that Justine had attracted Maurice’s notice in Paris, and that his invitation to Favart to accompany him to Flanders was nothing but a pretext for getting the poet’s wife into his power. Of this there is some doubt; but, on the other hand, there can be no question that, before the end of the year 1746, Maurice had fallen desperately in love with the young actress, and had determined to make her, *bon gré, mal gré*, his mistress.

“Mlle. de Chantilly,” he writes, “I take leave of you; you are an enchantress more dangerous than the late Madame Armide. Whether as Pierrot, whether under the guise of Love, or even as a simple shepherdess, you are so excellent that you enchant us all. I have seen myself on the point of succumbing—I, whose fatal art affrights the world. What a triumph for you, had you been able to make me submit to your laws! I thank you for not having used all your powers; you might well pass for a young sorceress, with your shepherd’s crook, which is nothing else than the magic

<sup>1</sup> “ . . . Je vous dires en outre que je suis amoureux depuis trois ans d’une petite Gelan (?) qui me joue des mauves tour et qui ma pense faire tourner la servelle; je vous en ay écrit quelque chose lanée passé, *elle ait possede du démon de l’amour conjugal*. . . . J’ay etes tente deux ou trois foy de la noier.”—Letter of Maurice de Saxe to his sister, the Princess von Holstein, March 10, 1747. We hesitate to produce the remainder of this letter, of which, as Desnoiresterres very justly remarks, the orthography is the least enormity, even in the original; but the curious reader will find it in *Les Lettres du Maréchal de Saxe à la Princesse de Holstein* (p. 20), published by the Société des Bibliophiles Français in 1831. A copy, presented by T. J. Dibdin to the Hon. Thomas Grenville, is in the possession of the British Museum.



Pour charmer la raison, la gaité la choisie,  
L'Embellit de ses agremens;  
Et comme autant de fleurs fit naître ses talens,  
Pour en offrir un Bouquet à Thalie.

JUSTINE FAVART

From an engraving by J. J. FLIPART, after the drawing by CHARLES NICOLAS  
COCHIN *fils*



wand with which that poor prince of the French, whom, I fancy, they called Renaud, was struck. Already I have seen myself surrounded with flowers and *fleurettes*, fatal equipment for all the favourites of Mars. I shudder at it; and what would the King of France and Navarre have said if, in place of the torch of his vengeance, he had found me with a garland in my hand? In spite of the danger to which you have exposed me, I have not the heart to blame you for my weakness; it is a charming one! But it is only by flying from it that one is able to escape a peril so great.

“ Adieu, divinité du parterre adorée ;  
Faites le bien d'un seul et les désirs de tous ;  
Et puissent vos amours égaler la durée  
De la tendre amitié que mon cœur a pour vous !

“ Pardon, Mademoiselle, to the remains of intoxication this *rhymed prose* to which your talents inspire me;<sup>1</sup> the effects of the liquor of which I have drunk endures, they say, often longer than one thinks.”

From this letter, which is undated, but was no doubt

<sup>1</sup> This is really very amusing. These pretty verses had been addressed, many years before, by Voltaire, to Adrienne Lecouvreur; and the Marshal not only coolly appropriates them, but adds insult to injury by calling them “rhymed prose”! One can imagine the indignation of the poet had this letter, by any chance, fallen into his hands. This was not the first time, however, that Voltaire’s verses had been purloined by an unscrupulous lover. The charming lines, in English, which he addressed to Lady Hervey, beginning—

“ Hervey, would you know the passion  
You have kindled in my breast,”

were subsequently transcribed by the lover of a Mrs. Harley, the wife of a London merchant, and formed part of the evidence on which her husband based his claim for a divorce.

written in the late autumn of 1746, as Maurice was on the point of setting out for Paris, where he spent the following winter, it would appear that the Marshal had already commenced the siege of the lady's heart. Whether his operations were crowned with success at this period is a point upon which there is a considerable difference of opinion. Dumolard, the editor of Favart's *Mémoires et Correspondance*, published in 1808, makes of Justine a perfect paragon of virtue, whose resistance the Marshal did not succeed in overcoming for some years, and then only under pressure of the most cruel persecution. M. Saint-Réne Taillandier, one of the most conscientious of Maurice's biographers, adopts the same view, and is very severe upon his hero's conduct in this matter; while he shows us Justine "despising alike threats and promises, the victim of disgraceful intrigues, persecuted, thrown into the depths of a dungeon, guarding pure and intact the dignity of her art, her honour, and her name: a rare lesson for an actress to give to a corrupt society." Sainte-Beuve<sup>1</sup> and Desnoiresterres, however, take a different view, and, much as we should wish to believe in the lady's innocence, we are compelled to admit that the evidence which they adduce leaves no room for doubt upon the matter. The former points to the report of the police-inspector, Meusnier, who declares that at Brussels Justine had ousted all the other enchantresses of the Marshal, and obtained so great an influence over her lover that no one could obtain any favour from him, except through her good offices,<sup>2</sup> and to Maurice's letter to the Princess of Holstein; while the latter cites a letter of Justine to the Marshal, written

<sup>1</sup> *Nouveaux Lundis* (1869), xi. 106-108.

<sup>2</sup> *Manuscrit trouvé à la Bastille* (1789), p. 5.



during her confinement in the Ursuline convent at Les Grands Andelys, in 1749, and which, in his opinion, amounts to a confession of her fault.<sup>1</sup>

But if Justine succumbed, as so many had succumbed before her, to this impetuous wooer, her fall would appear to have been due to a very different cause from that of any of her predecessors in the Marshal's affections. It is certain that her heart was not concerned in the matter, while it is very improbable that she was influenced by a desire to participate in the favours which Maurice was in the habit of heaping upon his enchantresses, though she subsequently admitted to having "availed herself of his benefits and assistance," doubtless being of opinion that, since the mischief was done, she was justified in making the best of the situation. The poor young woman, indeed, appears to have regarded the Marshal with feelings of positive aversion, and there can be little doubt, in view of what follows, that she was intimidated into surrender through fear of the consequences to herself and her husband of thwarting the man in whose power they had placed themselves; a fear which, as we shall presently see, was but too well justified.

Under these circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that the *liaison* should have been a brief one. Tortured by remorse, loving her unsuspecting husband the more

<sup>1</sup> We might add the testimony of Marmontel, who, from his very intimate relations with two prominent members of Maurice's seraglio, Mlles. Navarre and de Verrières, was without doubt well informed in regard to the Marshal's love-affairs. "He (Maurice de Saxe) always kept an *opéra comique* in his camp. Two performers belonging to this theatre, called *Chantilly* and *Beaumenard*, were his favourite mistresses; and he declared that their rivalry and caprices plagued him more than the Queen of Hungary's Hussars. I have read these words in one of his letters. For them it was that he neglected Mlle. Navarre."

now that she knew herself unworthy of his affection and confidence, still possessed, in fact, by "the demon of conjugal love," in spite of all Maurice's efforts to exorcise him, Justine only waited for a favourable opportunity to break her chains. Maurice's absence in Paris during the winter of 1746-1747 apparently gave her the necessary courage, and, on his return to Flanders, she refused, to his intense indignation, to resume her relations with him, and persisted in her resolution, notwithstanding all his threats and entreaties. Such was the position of affairs when hostilities were renewed in the spring, and the Favarts and their troupe quitted Brussels to join the army.

Favart's letters to his mother contain some interesting details of that campaign. He was present at the taking of the Fort Saint-Philippe, and speaks with righteous indignation of the barbarous execution of the garrison, which he stigmatises as "a disgrace to humanity." He also sends her a lively account of the battle of Lawfeld (July 2):—

"MY DEAR MOTHER,—I am in good health. The battle is won; the prediction I made to you has been verified. The action took place between Maestricht, Tongres, and Saint-Tron. The left of the enemy's army, composed of English, Hanoverians, and Hessians, was attacked in the morning; they defended themselves all day and fought desperately; but the issue is no longer in doubt. The enemy's right did not await our fire, but sought safety in flight; the Dutch and Austrians were routed without having fired a shot. The rest of the English, to the number of ten thousand, after defending themselves for three hours in a village into which they had been driven, endeavoured to escape across

the marshes ; but, meeting Clermont's army, which they had not expected, were annihilated.

"A simple carabinier took the English general, Ligonier, prisoner ; he is to them what Maréchal de Saxe is to us, if such a comparison were possible. The soldier conducted him to the King, together with a standard ; a moment later, the Duke of Cumberland was himself taken.<sup>1</sup> I have related all this very badly, because I am writing to you in haste ; it is the warmth of my French blood which guides my pen. Victory ! great victory ! everything is summed up in these last words. I am one of the first to write. The action still continues to our advantage, we have finished conquering, I say more, we have finished destroying. Pardon me if I say *we* ; through frequenting the society of heroes, I adopt their language. Show my letter to all our friends ; they have French hearts, and this success will interest them."<sup>2</sup>

Up to the time of the battle of Lawfeld, the repentant Justine would appear to have been left in comparative peace by her persecutor, military occupations presumably allowing Maurice but scant leisure for love-making. But, the allies disposed of, for the time being, the Marshal turned his attention to other matters, and showed himself so determined to recover his prey, that Justine saw that her only way of escape was to confess all to her still unsuspecting husband, implore his forgiveness, and demand his protection. The worthy Favart, though much shocked at such a revelation, had the good sense to perceive that his young wife had been the victim of circumstances, and that he himself was greatly to blame

<sup>1</sup> This was, of course, incorrect.

<sup>2</sup> Favart, *Memoires et Correspondance* (edit. 1808), i. 30.

for not having foreseen the danger which threatened her, and interfered to prevent it. He comforted her by an assurance of his full forgiveness, but pointed out that it would be impossible for her to escape the Marshal's unwelcome attentions so long as she remained with the army, and that her best course was to fly to Brussels and throw herself upon the protection of the Duchesse de Chevreuse, who had shown them much kindness during the preceding winter. Justine readily agreed to his proposal, and, that same night, without allowing any of their colleagues to suspect their intention, they set out for Brussels, where Favart placed his wife in safety with some of his friends, and then returned to the army to face the spiteful comments of his companions and the fury of the Marshal. A day or two after his arrival, he writes to the fugitive at Brussels:—

“I have arrived in good health, my dear little buffoon ; your own occasions me much uneasiness. Send me the surgeon's certificate, that I may show it to the Marshal. The gossip of the troupe has caused a report to be circulated that your illness is only an awkwardly devised piece of trickery to conceal your fears and my jealousy. I replied that there was no cause for jealousy, and that to suspect you was to insult you. M. de la Grolet<sup>1</sup> is to be consulted as to whether you are in a fit state to rejoin the army, and a threat has been conveyed to me that you shall be brought here forcibly by grenadiers, and that I shall be punished for having invented the story of your illness. For myself, I care little for their threats ; but I cannot forgive myself for having brought you to a country where you are exposed to such tyranny. We

<sup>1</sup> A military surgeon at Brussels.

are very uncomfortable here; I have not yet succeeded in finding a lodging, and, since leaving you, have slept on straw under the stars. If any attempt be made to send you back, implore assistance of the Duchesse de Chevreuse; she has too keen a sense of justice to refuse you her protection in a matter of such importance, and the kindness with which she has honoured us is a sure proof of that. She can tell M. de la Grolet that your health does not permit of your undertaking so trying a journey. Against such testimony nothing can prevail. Finally, my dearest, although your presence is necessary here for the sake of the performances, and I am burning with impatience to see you once more, your health, more precious than all our other interests, more dear to me than life itself, must be preferred to everything. Send news of yourself as soon as possible to your affectionate husband."

As will be gathered from the foregoing letter, Justine's flight had been very badly received by the commander of the army. Grimm relates the following anecdote, which would seem hardly credible, did we not know Maurice to be capable of any extravagance when his passions were thwarted:—

"The night of their escape was apparently very stormy, since the bridges of communication between the Marshal's army and Löwendal's corps, which was on the other side of the river, were carried away, and it was feared that the enemy might take advantage of the circumstance to fall upon this corps and crush it. M. Dumesnil, who was called at that time 'the handsome Dumesnil,'<sup>1</sup> came to the Marshal's quarters early in the morning, and found

<sup>1</sup> The Marquis Dumesnil, afterwards Lieutenant-General of Dauphiné.

him seated on his bed, his hair dishevelled, and a prey to the most bitter grief. Dumesnil attempted to console him. 'The misfortune is undoubtedly very great,' said he, 'but it may be repaired.' 'Ah, my friend!' replied the Marshal, 'there is no remedy; I am undone!' Dumensil continued his efforts to reanimate his courage and to reassure him in regard to the accident of the previous night. 'It will not, perhaps, have the results that you fear,' said he. But the Marshal continued a prey to despair, and to regard himself as a man at the end of his resources. At length, after about a quarter of an hour had passed in this way, he perceived that all that Dumesnil had said referred only to the broken bridges, upon which he exclaimed: 'What! who could have supposed that you were talking only of those broken bridges? That is an inconvenience which may be repaired in three hours. But the Chantilly has been taken from me!'"<sup>1</sup>

Furious though he was at the escape of his prey, Maurice, much to poor Favart's relief, took no steps to execute the threats which he had uttered in the heat of passion, and the performances of the troupe went on as before, save for the absence of Justine, who continued her flight to Paris, where she gave birth to a son. But Maurice was not the man to calmly accept defeat, in love any more than in war, and no sooner was peace signed, in the autumn of the following year, and he found himself at leisure to attend to his private affairs, than he embarked upon a determined persecution of the luckless pair who had dared to thwart him—a persecution which was the more difficult for them to escape, since, for a long time, they seem to have entertained not the slightest suspicion as to its real promoter.

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, vii. 464, cited by Desnoiresterres.

Favart was the first to feel the weight of the Marshal's vengeance. The rent of the Grand Theatre at Brussels, which he had leased since the spring of 1745, had been fixed at five hundred ducats per annum, and this sum had been regularly paid, so long as Brabant remained in possession of the French troops. When, however, by the terms of the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, the conquered territory was returned to Austria, Favart found himself in a most unpleasant situation; for the proprietors of the theatre, two ladies of the name of Myesses, without giving him an opportunity to enter a defence, obtained from the re-established Courts an order for his arrest and the sequestration of his theatrical stock, on the ground that he owed them a further sum of 26,000 francs. To avoid being thrown into prison, Favart was compelled to escape across the frontier; but so little did he suspect the share that the Marshal had in the misfortunes that had come upon him, that he actually wrote to him imploring his protection.

Maurice promised him all the assistance in his power, having previously assured himself that his interference was likely to do Favart more harm than good with the Brussels judges in their present state of feeling against the recent invaders of their country. The poet's appeal against the unjust decision failed, and, to make matters worse, the proprietors of the theatre, secretly instigated by the Marshal, applied to the Paris Courts for permission to execute the order for Favart's arrest on French territory.

While these events were taking place in Flanders, Justine was in Paris, where, if we are to credit the evidence of Meusnier, the Marshal had succeeded in persuading her to return to him, and had established her in

a house belonging to a Madame de Lesseville, which had been specially furnished for her benefit by Ossere, a fashionable upholsterer of the Pont Notre-Dame. Here—we are still following Meusnier—she lived “in a species of captivity,” all communication with her husband being most strictly interdicted. In defiance of this prohibition, however, she admitted him into the house at night, when he contrived to so work upon her feelings that she resolved to defy the Marshal a second time. “Accordingly, one fine night, when the latter was at Chambord, the Chantilly packed her belongings, carried off everything that she could, and retired with her husband to her mother-in-law’s house in the Rue de Verrerie. From there she wrote to the Marshal, informing him that it was no longer possible for her to live in sin, and that her salvation was dearer to her than all the fortunes in the world; notwithstanding which, she would retain for him eternal esteem and gratitude.” Meusnier adds that the Marshal, though naturally much surprised at such conduct on the lady’s part, succeeded in controlling his indignation, and “sought to avenge himself only by new benefits.”<sup>1</sup>

The first of these “benefits” was to make strong representations to the authorities on behalf of the proprietors of the Brussels theatre, who, as we have mentioned, were endeavouring to get Favart extradited, and to succeed in obtaining a promise that the necessary warrant should be duly granted. He then wrote to Justine as follows:—

“I am informed, Mademoiselle, that the Demoiselles Myesses (the proprietors of the Brussels theatre) intend

<sup>1</sup> *Manuscrit trouvé à la Bastille* (1789), p. 6.



to prosecute Favart, in virtue of the decree which they obtained against him at Brussels. I think that it will be advisable for you to go away, and, as you are not happily situated, I offer you an allowance of 500 livres, which will be paid you every month, until your affairs have taken a favourable turn.

“Have the kindness to inform me of your decision in this matter, and the place that you or Favart have chosen for your retreat.

“You are aware, Mademoiselle, of my sentiments for you.”

Favart took upon himself the task of answering the Marshal's letter. He tendered him his very humble thanks for his offer, which, however, he declined, as he had done nothing to merit such generosity, and it would be disgraceful for him to accept it. At the same time, all unsuspecting of Maurice's duplicity, he implored his protection against the Demoiselles Myesses, and went to his house to seek his advice.

Maurice advised him to make his escape while there was yet time; and old Madame Favart, having succeeded in borrowing fifty louis for her son, from Mlle. Lamotte of the Comédie-Française, the unfortunate poet fled to Strasburg the same night, where he remained for four months in hiding. He had effected his escape none too soon, for the very next day (June 10, 1749), a *lettre de cachet* for his arrest was issued.

A day or two after Favart's flight, Maurice left Paris on a visit to Dresden, whence he wrote to the poet's mother, offering to find her son “honourable employment,” and “a secure asylum, so long as he might require one,” and assuring her of his desire to render him every

service that lay in his power. Favart, however, seems to have grown a little suspicious of the Marshal's protestations of friendship, for, when the offer was communicated to him he declined it, and elected to continue in hiding at Strasburg.

The misfortunes which had befallen Favart had left his family without resources, and, but for the generosity of Mlle. Lamotte of the Comédie-Française, they would have found themselves in sore straits. Justine, however, took advantage of the Marshal's absence from Paris to enter into negotiations with the Comédie-Italienne, and, on August 6, 1749, made her *début* there, as Marianne in the *Épreuve* of Marivaux. Her success was astonishing. "The pit loudly demanded that she should be received into the company," writes Collé, who was among the audience; "and, whereas it was the rule not to admit French into the Italian troupes, or Italians into the French, it was altogether different in her case; there was a cabal in her favour, and the public had only to make a noise for the regulation to be set aside." Collé expresses his opinion that the *habitues* of the pit, particularly of the Comédie-Italienne, were becoming "childish and imbecile," and "ought to be placed under restraint."<sup>1</sup>

Poor Justine's delight at her success ("I have made all Paris rush to the theatre," she wrote to Favart) was not of long duration. The Marshal returned from Dresden "more in love with her than ever, notwith-

<sup>1</sup> Collé, *Journal et Mémoires* (edit. 1868), i. 99. Collé, like Grimm, shows himself very severe on Justine, whom almost all other contemporary writers agree in representing as a charming woman and an actress of remarkable talent. He describes her as "an impudent creature, without intelligence or skill, who sings vaudevilles with repulsive indecency, and dances with movements which seem suggestive and disgusting to persons of the smallest delicacy."

standing all the reasons he had to complain of her." According to Meusnier, it had been largely due to his influence with the Gentlemen of the Chamber that the difficulty in regard to her admission to the Comédie-Italienne had been so speedily overcome; but, when he asked for his reward, the lady would have nothing to say to him. "Far from showing the least sensibility of the Marshal's kindness, she coldly informed him that she was firmly resolved to live as an honest woman, and to labour for her salvation. This last example of ingratitude and bad faith confounded the Marshal."<sup>1</sup>

On September 1 Justine wrote to the fugitive at Strasburg:—

"The Marshal is still furious against me; but I am quite indifferent to that. He has just written a letter to Bercaville (his secretary), wherein he charges him to tell our mother (Madame Favart) that, if you come to Paris, and if she has any affection for you, of which he has no doubt, she must send you away instantly; and that this counsel was a last mark of his kindness for her.

"That, as for Mlle. Chantilly, she is deserving of no consideration at his hands, a fact which ought not to occasion you any vexation.

"Your friends are under the impression that you are travelling in France for your own diversion. If you wish it, I will consign my *début* to all the devils and set out at once to join you. Let me know your wishes, and I will follow them implicitly. . . . The house is always crowded on the nights on which I appear. I have been playing the part of the dancer in *Je ne sais quoi*, and of Fanchon in *La Triomphe de l'intérêt*. The ballet

<sup>1</sup> *Manuscrit trouvé à la Bastille* (1789) p. 8.

of *La Marmotte* is still being played with success. Your couplets are always received with applause. The duet which I sing with Richard is also your work; the mere fact that it is yours ensures my singing it well. I am threatened with much evil, but I laugh at it; I will come with all my heart to beg with you.

"I have just learned from your mother and sister that the Marshal wishes to replace the little Rivière;<sup>1</sup> and, for that purpose, has sent word to me that he loves me more than ever. Henceforth, it will be no longer advisable for me to go and pay my court to him.

"If it be not possible for us to remain here, we will go away and end our days tranquilly in some foreign country. I am for ever your wife and sweetheart."

When this letter was written, Justine had been for some weeks under strict surveillance. "On July 16, 1749," writes Meusnier, "I received orders to keep her under observation, in such a way as to be able to render an account of all her actions and movements, while the Marshal, on his side, worked to thwart all her plans." He then relates how he bribed a servant of the Favarts, named Jacques, to keep watch and ward over his mistress within doors, while he himself followed her when she left the house. This kind of thing went on until the beginning of September, apparently without much result, and then the Marshal "brought another battery into action."

We have mentioned that Justine's father, M. Duronceray, had not been present at her marriage with Favart, but had given his consent in writing. For the past two years he had been confined as a dipsomaniac in the

<sup>1</sup> Mlle. Rivière, one of Maurice's numerous mistresses.

convent of the Frères de la Charité, at Senlis, apparently on the application of his daughter, against whom he was, in consequence, much incensed. The Marshal now determined to make use of this unfortunate man for his own ends, and, accordingly, obtained his release from the convent at Sens and had him brought to Paris, where he lost no time in seeking an interview with the Lieutenant of Police and formally accusing his daughter of having contracted an illegal marriage, inasmuch as he had never given his consent to her union with Favart, and the document purporting to contain it had been a barefaced forgery. This, of course, was a very serious offence indeed, and, supported by the Marshal, the worthy M. Duronceray had no difficulty in obtaining a *lettre de cachet* for the arrest and imprisonment of Justine, whose fate was now entirely in the hands of her terrible admirer.

The *lettre de cachet* was granted on September 3; but it was not the Marshal's intention to allow it to be executed at once. Three days later, the police-agent, Meusnier, acting under his instructions, conducted the unconscious instrument of his employer's villainy to a café adjoining the Comédie-Italienne, where Justine was at that moment performing. Here, having been well primed with his favourite vintage, the wretched old man proceeded to regale all whom he could persuade to listen to him with a harrowing account of his daughter's wickedness and the terrible things he had suffered at her hands. Finally, he succeeded in working himself into such a frenzy of indignation that he could with difficulty be dissuaded from rushing into the theatre and making a public demonstration against her. "This manoeuvre," writes Meusnier cynically, "was merely

intended to induce the public to believe that the Marshal had no share in the coup which he was planning, namely, to cause the Chantilly to be shut up."

Next day, accompanied by a priest, who was well known as a frequenter of the Jesuit College in the Rue Saint-Jacques, M. Duronceray called upon the leading members of the Comédie-Italienne, to whom he related his sad experiences. Mlle. Coraline, Justine's rival in the affections of the public, was so touched by his account of her colleague's perfidy that she could not restrain her emotion, whereupon all who were present followed her example, and the room resounded with lamentations.

Justine would not appear to have been greatly disconcerted by the manœuvres of M. Duronceray and his sympathisers; secure in the favour of a public always very indulgent towards the moral shortcomings of its idols, she probably felt that she could afford to ignore the gossip of the *coulisses*. The Marshal, however, pretending to have forgiven her for her recent rebuff, now sent to warn her that her father was endeavouring to obtain a *lettre de cachet* to have her shut up, and advised her to leave Paris until the storm had blown over. His object was to induce her to rejoin her husband, when he intended to have them both arrested. In this, as we shall see, he was only partially successful.

At the beginning of October, the troupe of the Comédie-Italienne set out for Fontainebleau, to give a series of performances before the Court. Justine obtained leave of absence, and, having written to Favart to meet her at Lunéville, left Paris, on October 7, accompanied by her sister-in-law, Marguerite Favart, and followed, at a discreet interval, by Meusnier and

a detachment of police, with orders not to interfere with the actress until they had secured the person of her husband. The latter, however, succeeded in evading them, in spite of all their vigilance, and they had to be content with the rather barren honour of arresting poor Justine ; which they did in a very ungallant manner, in the middle of night, at her inn at Lunéville, nearly frightening her and her sister-in-law to death in consequence.

Next morning Meusnier and his captives started for Meaux, where the ladies were separated ; Marguerite Favart being permitted to return to Paris, while Justine, after being kept for some days at Meaux, was conducted to the Ursuline convent at Les Grands-Andelys, on the borders of Normandy. On October 20 she wrote to her husband :—

“They have brought me to the convent of Les Grands-Andelys, to the Ursulines, situated twenty-two leagues from Paris. I have seen the *lettre de cachet* ; it is my father who has caused me to be placed here. Do not lose an instant ; send all our papers [*i.e.* the papers connected with their marriage] to the Minister, M. d’Argenson, and especially my father’s consent, signed with his own hand ; it is in the keeping of the curé of Saint-Pierre-aux-Bœufs. Collect our witnesses, and take them with you to the Minister. If it is my father who is persecuting us in this manner, the truth will be revealed, and we shall speedily have justice done us. If this trouble is due to some of our enemies, they may do as they please ; their influence may perhaps be sufficient to separate us for life, but they can never prevent us loving one another, nor break the sacred and honourable tie which binds our hearts together.

"I have just written to the Maréchal de Saxe about what has befallen us; he has always shown much friendship for us. I am sure that he will be willing to interest himself in our affairs and render us assistance on this occasion.

"P.S.—Do not commit the folly of coming to seek me here."

A week later, she writes again:—

"I am in a good convent, where they pay me every imaginable attention. Spare no pains to justify our marriage with the Minister. You must write to M. de Paumi;<sup>1</sup> he can do us a service with my father. You need not write to the Maréchal de Saxe to ask his protection; he has rendered us too many services to refuse to assist us on the present occasion.

"If I had wished, I might have escaped what has befallen me; I had only to accept the retreat which a person<sup>2</sup> who warned me of the *lettre de cachet* obtained against me offered me; but I had no desire to do so."

A few days after the first of these letters was written, Justine received a letter from the Marshal, in answer to one which she had sent him from Commercy, on her way to Lunéville. In this he attributed her misfortunes to the action of the leaders of the *dévots*, or devout party, at the Court, who were always eager to punish persons who contravened the marriage laws, and "did not easily let go their prey." "Favart," he adds, "ought to feel highly flattered that you should sacrifice for him fortune,

<sup>1</sup> The Marquis de Paulmy, son of the Marquis d'Argenson, and afterwards Minister for War.

<sup>2</sup> Without doubt, Maurice de Saxe.



pleasure, glory, everything, in short, that might have made the happiness of your life. I hope that he will be able to compensate you for it, and that you will never feel the sacrifice which you are making. . . . You would not make my happiness and your own. Perhaps you will make your own unhappiness and that of Favart. I do not wish it, but I fear it.—Farewell.”

At the same time, the hypocritical Marshal wrote to the actress Mlle. Fleury, who had exchanged the rôle of mistress for that of confidante, expressing the grief he felt on hearing of the arrest of the “little fairy,” whom he had “imagined out of danger.” “How I pity that poor mother [Madame Favart], who is a courageous and sensible woman! I have been her friend since the first time I spoke to her. Tell her that I will do my best, and as she and Favart have not a sou, beg her to accept fifty louis, for which you will find an order enclosed. That will help them for the present, and I promise them assistance in every way for the future.” He then declares his opinion that the person responsible for the trouble is the priest who had accompanied Justine’s father on his visits to the leading members of the Comédie-Italienne, and that every effort should be made to discover him, if necessary, by bribing Meusnier to reveal his whereabouts.

The money offered by the Marshal was refused by Favart, nor could the old lady and her daughter be prevailed upon to accept it.

Early in November, Justine was removed from Les Grands-Andelys to a convent at Angers. Her new residence was one of the regular *couvents de force*, or houses of detention, where the most rigorous discipline prevailed, and she was treated “like a State criminal.” This, as the worthy Marshal had of course foreseen,

rendered her supremely miserable, and all the more eager to recover her liberty. To do her justice, however, she would appear to have been far more exercised over the fate of her husband and his mother and sister, left, through his misfortune, almost entirely without resources, than over her own troubles; for, on November 6, we find Maurice writing from Chambord:—

“The great attachment that you entertain for Favart and his relatives is very praiseworthy; but I doubt whether it is advisable to manifest it so clearly, since it is certain that it is this same great attachment which has placed you in the vexatious position in which you now find yourself. I leave to your good sense to judge of the value of what I take the liberty of observing in regard to this matter. . . . What is certain, is that he has not been arrested, and that he is well, and that none of his relatives are in danger of dying, as you appear to fear. They are all very tranquil, and have not taken any steps to secure your liberation. I do not comprehend their reasons.”

As time went on, the captive became a prey to the deepest despair. “Life is a burden to me; I loathe it,” she writes to Maurice, dating her letter “December 40th,” doubtless to express more forcibly the length and dreariness of her days. “I desire to die, in order that every one may be satisfied; I am living in a state of despair. Never can I recover from the blow that has brought all this upon me.”

On his side, the Marshal advised patience, assuring her that he was doing everything in his power to procure her release, but that the difficulties with which he had to contend were very great, inasmuch as it appeared that

her father had acted at the instigation of a band of religious fanatics, whose names he had not yet been able to ascertain. If he could find M. Duronceray, he might wring the truth from him, but, unfortunately, up to the present, all attempts to discover his whereabouts had proved fruitless. M. Duronceray, it may be mentioned, was at this time at Ormeaux, near Vincennes, in charge of one of Maurice's agents!

In the same letter, he tells her that Favart—the poor man was then hiding in a cellar in the house of a village priest in Lorraine—had paid a visit to Paris, and been seen by several persons; that he was informed that no steps would be taken against him by the police, so long as he remained quiet, and that he had appeared very far from inconsolable at his wife's captivity: "The race of poets does not take things so much to heart. Voltaire has produced two tragedies since the death of Madame du Châtelet, though it was said that he was dead also, because he was believed to be much attached to that lady. But to die, *malpeste!* an author's feelings do not carry him as far as that: they are too familiar with fiction to love reality up to that point."<sup>1</sup>

At length, about the middle of December, when the Marshal considered that his victim had had enough of conventual life to induce her to become amenable to reason, he informed her that, thanks to his untiring efforts on her behalf, she would, in all probability, be shortly released and exiled a certain distance from Paris. He was as yet, he said, in ignorance of the place to which she was to be sent, but was hopeful that it would be within easy distance of the capital, so that he might be

<sup>1</sup> Letter of December 6, 1749; *Manuscrit trouvé à la Bastille*, p. 36 *et seq.*

able to assist her "*de toutes les choses agréables et utiles.*" Justine, overjoyed at the prospect of a speedy end to her captivity, replied, begging him "in God's name not to deceive her," and declaring that she was suffering torments from uncertainty. "I await news from day to day with the utmost impatience since you have given me hope of being able to leave this villainous house. Every time that the bell rings, I have terrible palpitation of the heart. I believe that it is some one come to fetch me. I bound to the door, and, when I find that it is not I whom they seek, I return, covered with confusion, to shut myself up in my little cell and weep, like a little child who has been beaten for ten or twelve days. That is the life I am leading. When I leave here, I shall imagine that I am seeing daylight for the first time. I do not thank you for all your kindness, nor for all the obligations under which you have placed me; they are numberless, and I should never make an end. I know that you do not care for compliments, and I will therefore merely tell you that, so long as I live, I shall use every endeavour to prove to you my gratitude and appreciation of all that you are doing for us. Monseigneur, I implore you in mercy to take me from this place; you will be performing a work of mercy in releasing a poor little prisoner who has never deserved to be one. I eagerly await this good news from you."

In the closing days of the year, Justine received another letter from the Marshal, written from his château at Piples, near Boissy-Saint-Léger, in which he informed her that orders had been given for her release, and only awaited the signature of the Comte d'Argenson, the Minister for Paris, who was, at that moment, too ill to attend to any matters not of the

first importance. The letter concluded with the following very significant words, in a woman's handwriting, probably that of the Marshal's ex-mistress and confidante, Mlle. Fleury: "Your friends do not forget you, my dear Jantillesse,<sup>1</sup> and love you always; but, in God's name, become reasonable; think of your own happiness and that of those dear to you."

On the other hand, Justine's sister-in-law, Marguerite Favart, who had evidently discovered the secret of the persecution which the luckless couple were undergoing, wrote to the captive, apparently in answer to a letter from Angers, entreating her to be firm, and to refuse to purchase liberty at the price which would no doubt be set upon it:—

"If you think, as you show you do, my dear sister-in-law, I do not see how you can hesitate as to the course you ought to take, since you are in a position to do as you please. It was not necessary to ask the advice of my brother. You ought to know him well enough to be sure that he would not give you any counsel different from that which he has always given. He knows of no arrangement that can be made with infamy; the most cruel punishments would not terrify him, nor could he be seduced by the most brilliant advantages. He escaped, for a time, from the rest of the evils prepared for him, and did not do so for his own sake. The loss of you had rendered his life odious to him; but he yielded to our alarms; he feared the despair of a mother and a sister already afflicted by the misfortunes which had overtaken him. His son, ourselves, and

<sup>1</sup> Allusion to Justine's stage name of Chantilly, which the Marshal spelt *Jantilly*.

yourself are the only objects of his hopes and fears. That is all that can interest him now. He has lost, through these continual persecutions, his friends, his protectors, his property, his talents, his health, and all his resources. Nevertheless, he will consider all atoned for when he finds in you sentiments worthy of him. He does not ask to be their object: honour alone must determine you. Content with loving you, he demands nothing in return; knowing, by sad experience, that the heart is not to be commanded. If it be true that you have been detained by force, now that you are free, you will find with us a poor but honourable asylum. Although everything has been done to cast upon my brother and upon us part of the disgrace in which you have been immersed, no one has been deceived, save ill-informed or ignorant persons. Our poverty, our sufferings, justify us in the eyes of sensible people; for which reason our condition has become dear to us: by contenting yourself with it, you can justify yourself also. Such are the sentiments of my brother and ourselves. I inform you of them by my mother's orders. Adieu, my good friend; your affectionate sister embraces and awaits you. Adieu."<sup>1</sup>

Several historians are of opinion that Justine followed her sister-in-law's advice, and that Maurice, in despair of bending her to his will, placed no further obstacles in the way of her release. Such, unfortunately, was not the case. Early in January 1750, the actress was released from the convent at Angers, and exiled to Issoudun, in Berri. On February 10, she obtained permission from

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Desnoiresterres, *Épicuriens et lettrés*, p. 253.

Berryer, the Lieutenant of Police, to absent herself for a month from her place of exile, a permission which was renewed at the expiration of that period. Where did she spend the time? The answer is to be found in the report of Meusnier :—

“ But as M. de Loewdahl [Marshal Löwendal, the lieutenant and friend of Maurice] is visiting the Marquis de Castelnau in the vicinity of Issoudun, the Marshal has caused the Chantilly to be sent to Chambord, and thence to Piples, where she has been about six weeks, under the charge of Mouret, wife of the concierge of Chambord.”<sup>1</sup>

The evidence of Meusnier is confirmed by the Abbé de Voisenon, than whom no one was better acquainted with the private affairs of the Favarts :—

“ The Marshal, angered by her resistance, caused her to be carried off, and threatened to have Favart killed, if she refused to surrender herself to him. She was terrified, and, through love for her husband, was unfaithful to him. . . . The Marshal died; and, as the Chantilly mingled with the favours that were snatched from her the most cruel reproaches, she scarcely obtained any advantage besides her freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

Towards the end of the following June, the *lettres de cachet* against Justine and her husband were revoked, and they were permitted to return to Paris. Poor Favart had been reduced to terrible straits. Almost penniless and firmly convinced that all the police in the realm were at his heels, he had for some months past, as we have mentioned, been hiding in a cellar in the house of a compassionate village priest in Lorraine,

<sup>1</sup> *Manuscrit trouvé à la Bastille* (1789), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres de l'Abbe de Voisenon* (edit. 1781), iv. 70.

earning a precarious livelihood by painting fans by the light of a lamp. The cruel treatment he had received had impaired his health and broken his spirit, and he received the news that his trials were at an end with feelings of positive indifference. "It seems," wrote he to a friend who had sheltered him at Strasburg, "that they are tired of persecuting me; my exile is over, but I am none the happier for that; my sorrows are of a kind that can end only with my life."

Three months after this letter was written (November 30, 1750), Maurice de Saxe died at Chambord,<sup>1</sup> and poor Favart could breathe freely once more. The poet might have been pardoned had he sought consolation for his sufferings in some biting epigram at the expense of the man who had wronged him so cruelly. But his kindly and inoffensive nature was incapable of malice, and he behaved with a moderation almost amounting to magnanimity. "I think," he wrote to one of his friends, "that I may be allowed to say on the death of this illustrious man of war, what the father of our theatre said of Cardinal de Richelieu :—

"Qu'on parle bien ou mal du fameux maréchal,  
Ma prose ni mes vers n'en diront jamais rien :  
Il m'a fait trop de bien pour en dire du mal ;  
Il m'a fait de mal pour en dire du bien."

The Marshal was dead, but his death could not undo the evil he had done. Favart, who had loved his wife with all the strength of his nature, was generous

<sup>1</sup> According to the official version, of a malignant fever : according to local rumour, of wounds received in a duel with the Prince de Conti, with whom he had a long-standing quarrel. The Marshal's biographer, M. Saint-René Taillandier, inclines, we observe, to the latter view; but the evidence he adduces does not seem to us altogether satisfactory.



enough to pardon a past in which circumstances had been so terribly against her. Instead of reproaching her, he preferred to forget, and in so doing acted wisely; for in Justine, as long as she lived, he found a devoted friend and a sure counsellor, on whose sympathy and advice he was always able to rely, and a companion whose irrepressible gaiety was proof against all the troubles and anxieties of both family and professional life. But his generosity went no further. If friendship had survived Justine's last infidelity, love had not. "Fly from love as from the greatest of all evils," he wrote to his friend at Strasburg; and, incredible as it may appear, when, not long afterwards, Justine, piqued, we may presume, by her husband's indifference, formed a *liaison* with the eccentric little Abbé de Voisenon, Favart's friend and reputed collaborator, the poet—this man whom we have seen prefer persecution, exile, and misery to dishonour—so far from endeavouring to put a stop to an affair which amounted to a serious scandal, appears to have regarded it with the utmost complacency.

The removal of their persecutor left the Favarts free to resume their respective professions, and, on May 3, 1751, Justine reappeared on the stage of the Comédie-Italienne, in a piece entitled *Les Amants inquiets*, of which her husband was the author. At the beginning of the following year, on the death of Riccoboni's wife, she was allotted a full part in the company, to which she remained a tower of strength for nearly twenty years; her talents as an actress and a singer being rivalled by those which she displayed as a dancer, "turning the heads of the public and securing even the support of the

women." Her versatility seems to have been truly amazing. "*Soubrettes*, heroines, country girls, simple parts, character parts, all became her," says Favart in his *Mémoires*; "in a word, she multiplied herself indefinitely, and one was astonished to see her play the same day, in four different pieces, parts of the most opposite character." Her powers of mimicry, too, particularly of the different dialects of France, have seldom been surpassed. Provincials whose accents she had borrowed could with difficulty be persuaded that she did not come from the same part of the country as themselves.

Possessed of exquisite taste in theatrical matters, Justine laboured strenuously for a reform in stage costume, and was "not afraid to sacrifice the charms of her countenance to truthfulness of representation." Before her time, actresses who played the parts of *soubrettes* and peasant-girls wore immense *paniers*, with diamonds in their hair and long gloves reaching to the elbow. But when, in August 1753, she created the rôle of Bastienne in *Les Amours de Bastien et Bastienne*, a parody of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Devin du village*, which she had composed herself in collaboration with Harny, she appeared on the stage wearing a simple woollen gown, with her hair flat on her head, a cross of gold on her neck, bare arms, and wooden shoes. The *sabots* offended some critics in the pit, and murmurs of disapprobation were heard. The Abbé de Voisenon, however, saved the situation by a happy *mot*. "*Messieurs*," he cried, "*ces sabots-là donneront des souliers aux comédiens*." The pit, appreciating the abbé's wit, broke into laughter and applause; the malcontents were silenced, and the piece had so great a vogue that the players grew tired

of acting it long before the attendances showed any signs of diminishing.<sup>1</sup>

Justine, indeed, neglected nothing to arrive at theatrical truth. In *Les Trois Sultanes*, the plot of which was derived, like several other of Favart's vaudevilles, from the *Contes moraux* of Marmontel, she played the part of Roxelane in a dress "made at Constantinople with the materials of the country." This was the first occasion on which the costume of Turkish ladies had been seen upon the French stage, and though Favart himself declares that it was "at once decent and voluptuous," it was objected to; and when soon afterwards another play in which the action passed in the Orient was represented before the Court, Justine's reforming zeal received an abrupt check by an order from the Gentlemen of the Chamber to confine herself to the ridiculous and fantastic costume established by custom.

*Les Trois Sultanes*, it may be mentioned, in spite of the unfavourable comments passed upon Roxelane's attire, was extraordinarily successful; and the audience, we are assured, were transported with enthusiasm. A peasant in the pit, "*rendu fou d'admiration*," demanded of his neighbour the name of the author, and on being told that it was Favart, exclaimed: "*Morbleu!* I would that I had that man here; I would embrace him until I had kissed the skin off his cheeks!"

Justine's passion for local colour was again in evidence when the interlude called *Les Chinois* was represented. "She appeared, as did also the other actors, dressed exactly in the Chinese fashion. The dresses which she had procured had been made in China, while the designs

<sup>1</sup> Compardon, *Les Comédiens du Roi de la Troupe italienne*, ii. 210.

for the scenery and properties had in like manner been made on the spot."

Among other pieces in which Justine appeared with success may be mentioned *La Servante Maîtresse*, *Ninette à la Cour*, *Annette et Lubin*, of which she herself was part-author, *Les Moissonneurs*, and *La Fée Urgèle*, "in which," says Voisenon, "she played the part of the old woman in a manner impossible to imitate." According to the same authority, Favart was largely indebted for the success of more than one of his productions to suggestions made by his wife, notably in *Ninette à la Cour*, in which, too, she was responsible for many of the airs.

It would perhaps have been better for Justine's professional reputation had circumstances compelled her to retire from the stage some time earlier than was the case. During her later years, the critics declared that her voice had become thin and disagreeable, and that her acting had lost the *naïveté* which had been its principal charm. She had become, too, extremely stout, and Madame Necker, then Mlle. Churchod, writing, in 1764, to Madame de Brenles, mentions that she had seen her playing Annette, "with a figure twelve feet broad and two high."<sup>1</sup> The public were more indulgent than the critics; but on December 14, 1769, when she appeared in a vaudeville by her husband called *La Rosière de Salency*, she was very coldly received. The poor actress, believing herself abandoned by the public whose idol she had so long been, and suffering already from the disease of which she eventually died, played from that time less frequently, and, at the end of the year 1771, ceased to appear altogether. On Twelfth-day she was compelled to take to her bed, and sent for

<sup>1</sup> Desnoiresterres, *Épicuriens et Lettrés*, p. 315.

the notaries to make her will. She lingered for four months, enduring terrible sufferings, during which she continued to occupy herself with the management of her household, while her gaiety and insouciance never failed her for a single moment. "One day," says Grimm, "on recovering from a long swoon, she perceived, among those whom her danger had hurriedly assembled around her, one of her neighbours rather grotesquely attired, whereupon she began to smile and remarked that she believed she saw 'the clown of Death'; a characteristic *mot* in the mouth of a dying girl of the theatre."

Almost to the last Justine seems to have cherished a vague hope that she would ultimately recover, and, for a long time, refused to pronounce the renunciation of her profession which the curé of her parish demanded, according to custom, before administering the last Sacraments. Nor was it until, through the influence of Voisenon, she had obtained a promise from the Gentlemen of the Chamber that her salary should be preserved to her, under the form of a pension, in case of retirement, that she yielded, and exclaimed, smiling: "Oh! for the moment, I renounce it." She then received the Sacraments and, profiting by a short respite from pain, composed her own epitaph, which she set to music. She died on April 21, 1772, at four o'clock in the morning, in her forty-sixth year, and was buried the same day in the church of Saint-Eustache.

Favart survived his talented wife just twenty years, and died in May 1792. Towards the end of his life, he became almost blind, notwithstanding which he continued to work for the theatre, besides keeping up an active correspondence with the Italian dramatist Goldoni,

who came to Paris to visit him in 1791. The most successful of his later pieces was *La Belle Arsène*, music by Monsigny, produced in 1775.

Of his children by Justine, the only one to call for notice here is his second son, Charles Nicolas Joseph Favart. Born in 1749, at the age of twenty-one he was admitted a *sociétaire* of the Comédie-Française, where he remained for fifteen years. Though but a moderate actor, he was a successful dramatist; his best works were *Le Diable boiteux, ou la Chose impossible* (1782); *Les Trois Folies* (1786); *Le Mariage singulier* (1787); and *La Vieillesse d'Annette et Lubin* (1791), the last in collaboration with his father. His son, Antoine Pierre Charles Favart (1780-1867), entered the Diplomatic Service, where he gained some little distinction. He assisted Dumolard in editing the *Mémoires* of his grandfather, collaborated in a couple of plays, and was an amateur painter of some talent.

VI  
MADEMOISELLE CLAIRON





## VI

### MADemoiselle CLAIRON

FOR more than seven years after the death of Adrienne Lecouvreur, her place as a tragic actress remained unfilled. During these years, several capable *tragédiennes* appeared, notably Jeanne Gaussin, a beautiful brunette with a rich and sympathetic voice, who created the part of Zaïre in Voltaire's tragedy of that name (August 13, 1732), and moved the delighted poet to address her in the following verses :—

“ Jeanne Gaussin, reçois mon tendre hommage ;  
Reçois mes vers au théâtre applaudis ;  
Protège-les : *Zaïre* est ton ouvrage ;  
Il est à toi, puisque tu l'embellis.  
Ce sont tes yeux, ces yeux, si pleins de charmes,  
Qui du critique ont fait tomber les armes.” <sup>1</sup>

But beautiful as Mlle. Gaussin undoubtedly was, and excellent as was her acting in *Zaïre* and other pathetic parts, she fell very far short of the standard to which her gifted predecessor had attained ; nor was it until August 1737 that an actress worthy to assume the mantle of Adrienne arose.

This was Marie Françoise Dumesnil, who, like Adrienne, had begun her career at theatres in the East of France, and, like her, singularly enough, had received her invitation to Paris while playing at Strasburg. Her style, which was marked by a high degree of truth to

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Gueullette, *Acteurs et Actrices du Temps passé*, p. 260.

Nature, refinement, and technical skill, combined with a real enthusiasm for her art, excited general admiration, and her *début* was brilliantly successful. In the classic répertoire her most celebrated rôles were Cléopâtre, Clytemnestre, and Phèdre; while her most successful creation was Mérope (February 20, 1743), when, according to Voltaire, she kept the audience in tears for three successive acts.<sup>1</sup>

After this triumph—the greatest of her career—it may well have been supposed that Mlle. Dumesnil was destined to maintain her supremacy for many years to come. Nevertheless, ere six months had passed, she found her proud position challenged by a most formidable rival.

Claire Joseph Lerys—for that was the name of this rival, and of the greatest, or, at least, the most celebrated tragic actress of the eighteenth century, though she styled herself Claire *Josèphe Hippolyte Lerys de Latude-Clairon*, and is known to fame under the last of these names—was born at Condé, a little town of Hainaut, on January 25, 1723. Her father was one François Joseph Desiré Lerys, a sergeant in the Régiment de Mailly; her mother, a working-woman, Marie Claire Scanapiecq by name; and she was a natural child, a fact which she omits to mention in the French edition of her *Mémoires*, though she is more candid in the German edition.<sup>2</sup>

The circumstances attending her birth, which she has herself recounted, were, it must be admitted, highly significant of her future career:—

“It was the custom of the little town in which I was born for all persons to assemble during the carnival time at the houses of the wealthiest citizens, in order to

<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, “The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century,” i. 355.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 4.

pass the entire day in dancing and other amusements. Far from disapproving of these recreations, the curé partook of them and travestied himself with the rest. During one of the fête days, my mother, who was but seven months advanced in pregnancy, suddenly brought me into the world, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon. I was so feeble that every one imagined a few moments would terminate my career. My grandmother, a woman of eminent piety, was anxious that I should be carried out at once to the church, in order that I might there receive the rite of baptism. Not a living soul was to be discovered either at the church or at the curé's house. A neighbour having informed the party that all the town was at a carnival entertainment at the house of a certain wealthy citizen, thither was I carried with all expedition. Monsieur le Curé, attired as Arlequin, and his vicar, disguised as Gille, imagining, from my appearance, that there was not a moment to be lost, hurriedly arranged upon a sideboard everything necessary for the ceremony, stopped the fiddle for a moment, muttered over me the consecrated words, and sent me back to my mother a Christian—at least in name.”<sup>1</sup>

When the little girl was twelve years old, she and her mother left Condé, and, after a short stay at Valenciennes, settled in Paris, where the latter found employment as a sempstress. The future queen of tragedy was at this time, according to her own account, a delicate, sensitive child, with a confirmed dislike to needlework, in consequence of which she spent the greater part of her days “trembling beneath the blows and threats of her mother,” whom she describes, rather undutifully, as “a violent, ignorant, and superstitious woman.”

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Mademoiselle Clairon* (edit. 1799), p. 235.

However, at length Fate took pity on her. Her mother, yielding to the remonstrances of the neighbours, who had been "affected by the appearance of languor to which her misfortunes had reduced her, and her beauty, voice, intelligence, and the sweetness of her temper when she was not forced to work at the needle," ceased to belabour her, and, by way of punishment, took to shutting her up in a room overlooking the street. Now, it happened that the house immediately opposite the Scanapiecs was occupied by the mother of Mlle. Dangeville, the famous *soubrette* of the Comédie-Française, and, one day, little Claire, having mounted a chair to survey the neighbourhood, beheld the idol of the pit taking a dancing-lesson in the midst of an admiring circle of relatives and friends. "She was distinguished," she tells us, "for every charm which Nature and youth could unite in the same person. My very being came into my eyes; not one of her movements escaped me. She was surrounded by her family, and when the lesson was over, every one applauded her, while her mother embraced her. The difference between her condition and my own penetrated me with the deepest grief; my tears would not permit me to see anything more. I descended from my chair, and, when the throbbing of my heart had subsided sufficiently for me to remount it, all had disappeared."<sup>1</sup>

From that day, little Claire had only one desire: to be placed *en pénitence* at the hour at which Mlle. Dangeville was in the habit of taking her lesson; and, the moment she was alone, she would climb to her perch and remain there, a motionless and silent, but enthusiastic spectator of the movements of her fair neighbour. Soon, at first

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 166 et seq.

almost unconsciously, the girl began to imitate what she had seen, and with such success that those who came to her mother's house thought that she had been provided with masters. "My manner of entering a room," she says, "of saluting the company, of seating myself, was no longer the same; and the improvement I had acquired, added to the graces of my deportment, obtained for me even the favour of my mother."

At length, unable any longer to keep her secret to herself, and seized with an intense curiosity to ascertain who this wonderful Mlle. Dangeville might be, she decided to take into her confidence one of her mother's friends, who had always treated her a little less as a child than the majority of visitors to the house. This proved a fortunate step, for the person in question, pleased with the little girl's intelligence, not only gave her a good deal of information about Mlle. Dangeville and the profession which she adorned, but obtained from her mother—not without considerable difficulty, for the sempstress "saw in theatrical performances only the road to eternal damnation"—permission to take her to the Comédie-Française to witness a representation of the *Comte d'Essex* and *Les Folies amoureuses*.

Mlle. Clairon, in her *Mémoires*, confesses her inability to give any account of that never-to-be-forgotten evening. She only recollects that, during the whole of the performance, her absorption was such as to prevent her uttering a single word, and that, on returning home, she neither saw nor heard any one. Angrily dismissed to her room by her mother, instead of going to sleep, she spent the whole night in recalling and repeating everything that had been said by the performers at the theatre, and every one was astonished the next day to

hear her repeat, with scarcely a mistake, a hundred verses of the tragedy and two-thirds of the after-piece. But this feat of memory was less surprising than the extraordinary way in which the little girl had contrived to assimilate the peculiarities of every actor whom she had seen. She lisped like Grandval, she stammered like Poisson, she mimicked to a nicety the coquettish airs of Mlle. Dangeville, and the cold and dignified manner of Mlle. Balicourt;<sup>1</sup> in short, she tells us, she was looked upon as a prodigy by every one, save her mother, who, frowning angrily, declared that she would rather see her make a gown or a petticoat than waste her time over such unprofitable nonsense. Claire, however, fortified by the praises which she had received, boldly declared her intention of becoming an actress, and, when the enraged sempstress threatened to starve her into submission, or "break her arms and legs," retorted, with the air of a tragedy queen: "Ah, well! you had better kill me at once, since otherwise I am determined to go upon the stage."

Marie Scanapiecq did not, it is hardly necessary to remark, attempt to put her threats into execution; nevertheless, for some two months, she subjected her unfortunate little daughter to a course of such rigorous discipline, in the hope of breaking her spirit, that Claire's health became seriously affected. Then the stern mother began to relent, and, on the advice of one of her customers, to whom she had confided her trouble, finally decided to let the girl have her way, and took

<sup>1</sup> Mlle. Balicourt played queens and princesses, and had probably impersonated the Queen Elizabeth of Thomas Corneille's play on the evening when Clairon visited the Comédie. She made her *début* in 1727, and retired in 1738, on account of ill-health.

her to see the lady in question, who had promised to use her influence to further her ambitions. The lady presented Claire to Desheys, a prominent actor of the Comédie-Italienne, who was so favourably impressed with the little aspirant's abilities that he presented her, in his turn, to his colleagues, and, after a course of instruction in dancing and music, she made her *début* at the "Italians" on January 8, 1736, in a small part in Marivaux's *Isle des Esclaves*, under the name of Clairon, a variation of her Christian name of Claire.

Although not yet thirteen, she appears to have acquitted herself with credit, while the progress she made in her profession was remarkable. "My industry, my enthusiasm, my memory," says the actress, "confounded my instructors. I retained everything, I devoured everything." Nevertheless, whether on account of her youth, her diminutive stature—she was very short, even for her age—or, more probably, because her precocious talents had excited the apprehensions of the famous Arlequin, Thomassin, who had daughters of his own to bring forward, she did not remain long at the Comédie-Italienne, and, at the end of a year, found herself obliged to seek her fortune in the provinces.

It was to Rouen that she went—Rouen, the nursery of the Paris theatres—Rouen, which had witnessed the first efforts of Marie de Champmeslé, whose triumphs in tragedy this young girl was one day to eclipse. The principal theatre there was at this time under the joint-management of La Noue, author of *La Coquette corrigée*, and Mlle. Gautier, both, in after years, prominent members of the Comédie-Française; and Mlle. Clairon was engaged to dance in the ballet, sing in comic opera, and act in a few parts suited to her age, at a salary of

100 pistoles, or about 1000 livres. As some compensation for this meagre remuneration, Marie Scanapiecq, who had accompanied her daughter, and whose views with regard to the morality of dramatic performances had undergone a most surprising alteration since she had discovered that there was money to be made, was installed superintendent of the box-office.

At Rouen, little Clairon soon became a general favourite, and improved so rapidly in her acting that, by the time she was sixteen, she was pronounced to be the most charming *soubrette* the Norman capital had ever possessed. The Rouen ladies were very far from sharing the prejudices of most provincial dames, who believed themselves degraded if they so much as spoke to an actress, and the girl was invited everywhere. A certain Madame de Bimorel, wife of a president of the Parliament of Normandy, and an old flame of the poet Fontenelle, was particularly kind, and remained her firm friend for more than forty years.

A gay town was Rouen in those days; a place where a young and pretty actress could count on receiving almost as much admiration as in the capital itself. At the theatre they still talked of the *cause célèbre* arising out of an affray between the Marquis de Cony and the Président de Folleville, which had taken place some years before; how the marquis, encountering the president at the house of a certain *danseuse* whose heart he had until that moment fondly imagined to be his alone, had addressed him by an opprobrious name; how the president had retorted by a blow directed at the nose of the marquis, and how the infuriated nobleman had thereupon thrown his adversary into the fireplace, with such violence as to incapacitate him from administering



justice for many a long day to come. Whence arose the lawsuit in question, bringing with it much glory and fame for the damsel who had been the cause of the dispute and the profession in general.

As was only to be expected, the charming impersonator of *soubrettes* had no lack of adorers, and she is reported to have been not altogether insensible to the devotion of a M. du Rouvray, a handsome youth of good family, whom she met at Madame de Bimorel's house, and to the more business-like attentions of a certain rich merchant, named Dubuisson. She had also a third *soupirant*, whose passion was to occasion her much tribulation.

Following the example of many actresses' mothers at this period, Marie Scanapiecq, "whose rigid morals," says her dutiful daughter, "were now discarded for gaiety and pleasure, and who spoke of her former mode of life with derision," had converted her house at Rouen into a kind of *pension*, where gambling and even more questionable practices were freely permitted, if not actually encouraged. Among those who frequented the establishment was an actor named Gaillard de la Bataille, "a poor, rather amusing devil," who possessed that almost indispensable qualification for a *vainqueur de dames* in the eighteenth century, the art of celebrating their charms in verse. To Mlle. Clairon he consecrated his muse, and every day chanted her praises in couplet or in quatrain, wherein he vowed that Venus and Vesta were unworthy to be compared with this adorable, this divine young actress. But alas! he was not content with this innocent homage; he dared to love her, "and all the while that he extolled her charms and her virtue, plotted to possess himself of the first and to destroy the other."

One summer morning, when her mother happened to be away from home, Mlle. Clairon was studying her part in bed, all unconscious of evil. Suddenly the door flew open, and her lovelorn poet, who had bribed one of the servants of the house to admit him, appeared upon the threshold, and, casting himself on his knees before her, besought her, in impassioned accents, to reciprocate the flame which was devouring him. His divinity's only response to this appeal was to call loudly for assistance; servants and lodgers, alarmed by her cries, were quickly on the scene, and "with brooms and shovels drove the wretch into the street." "When my mother returned home," continues the actress, "it was resolved that we should lodge a complaint against him; he was reprimanded by the magistrate, had ballads made about him, and was for ever banished our house. But rage succeeded to his love and his desires, and he composed that atrocious libel which has been read all over Europe."

Gaillard did indeed take a cruel revenge for the ignominious treatment he had received, for his pamphlet, which was entitled *Histoire de Mademoiselle Cronel, dite Frétillon, actrice de la Comédie de Rouen, écrite par elle-même*, aided by the subsequent celebrity of its victim, ran through several editions, and the sobriquet "Frétillon" stuck to her for life. Mlle. Clairon was at Havre when the libel appeared, and "her anguish was beyond all power of expression." She returned to Rouen in fear and trembling, "imagining that every door would be barred against her, and not daring to look any one in the face." However, the play-loving Rouennais, who were very indulgent towards the moral failings of the ladies of the theatre, appear to have been

more diverted than scandalised, and she "found the same public and the same friends."

Soon, however, trouble arose in another quarter. The troupe of La Noue and Mlle. Gautier, driven from Rouen by the competition of an opera company, went to try its fortune in Flanders. Mlle. Clairon's mother accompanied her, and, while the troupe was performing at Lille, took advantage of the fact of her daughter being now separated from Madame de Bimorel and her other friends, to endeavour to coerce her into a marriage with one of her comrades, whom the girl cordially detested. In a curious passage in her *Mémoires*, Mlle. Clairon attributes to this persecution the loss of her innocence:—

"The orders of my mother, her violence, which she carried so far as to present a pistol to me, in order to obtain my consent, made me at last sensible of the necessity of having a protector, who, without appealing to the laws, might be able to restrain those about me and defend me against them. Actuated by despair alone, without any base, mercenary motive, without love, without desires, I offered and surrendered myself, on the sole condition of being protected from the marriage and death that threatened me at the same time. That moment, which, at first sight, conveys only an impression of licentiousness, is perhaps the most noble, the most interesting, the most striking of my life."

Unhappily, the sympathy which this passage might otherwise arouse in the lady's readers is somewhat discounted by the perusal of the following extract from an official report which the police-inspector, La Janière, sent to Berryer, the Lieutenant of Police, some years later, from which it appears that so violent and persistent was

the persecution to which the unfortunate young actress was subjected by her mother and her unwelcome admirer, that not one, but three protectors were necessary for her safety:—

“After some years, having accepted an engagement with the director of the theatre at Lille, she (Clairon) appeared on the stage in that town, and did not remain long without making conquests. The Comte de Bergheick, colonel of the Régiment Royal-Wallon, the Chevalier de By, lieutenant-colonel of the same regiment, and M. Desplace, major of cavalry, were her three chief protectors.

“People are at first alarmed at the sight of three rival warriors contending for the heart of this girl, but let them be reassured, everything will pass off tranquilly. The Clairon was a careful girl, and, besides, adroit enough to keep in play half-a-dozen lovers. Thus everything worked smoothly, and all were satisfied.”<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 1742, La Noue, whose tenancy of the Rouen theatre had not been attended with the success he had anticipated, and whom the outbreak of the Austrian Succession War had compelled to relinquish a project of taking a company to Berlin, returned to Paris, to make his *début* at the Comédie-Française. His troupe was in consequence dispersed, and Mlle. Clairon, finding herself without employment, joined a travelling company which had been engaged to perform at Ghent, then the headquarters of the English army. Here, she tells us,

<sup>1</sup> Ravaisson, *Archives de la Bastille*, xii. 348.

“Mlle. Clairon contrived, during the early part of her career, to have three lovers at a time constantly in her train—one whom she deceived, one whom she received *à la derobée*, and one who lived on sighs.”—“Memoirs of the Margravine of Anspach,” i. 220.

she was received with enthusiastic applause, and "my lord" Marlborough<sup>1</sup> laid his immense fortune at her feet. But Mlle. Clairon was, above all things, a patriot, and "my lord" and his immense fortune had no attractions for her. "The contempt which the English nation affected for mine," she says, "rendered every individual belonging to it insupportable to me. It was impossible for me to listen to them without expressing my dislike." So strong indeed was her aversion to the enemies of her country that it was only with the greatest difficulty that she could be prevailed upon to contribute to their entertainment. Finally, she could endure the situation no longer, and, in spite of the efforts of her comrades to detain her, procured a passport and escaped to Dunquerque.

After a short stay at Dunquerque, Mlle. Clairon proceeded to Paris. According to her own account, she had while there received an order from the Gentlemen of the Chamber directing her to make her *début* at the Opera. From La Janière's report, however, it appears that "conscious that her talents were too sublime for the provinces, and that she was destined to shine in a greater sphere," she came on her own initiative to the capital, where she was for some months without employment. Ultimately, continues the report, she "accepted the propositions" of the wealthy farmer-general, La Popelinière, who posed as a patron of the arts, and, through his influence, mounted the stage of the Palais-Royal.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Spencer, third Duke of Marlborough, and fifth Earl of Sunderland (1706-1758). He was, at this time, colonel of the 28th Foot, and, the following year, commanded a brigade at the battle of Dettingen. The name is written Mar \* \* \* in the French edition of Mlle. Clairon's Memoirs, but in full in the German.

However that may be, to the Opera she was admitted, and there, in March 1743, made her *début* in the rôle of Venus, in *Hésione*. In her *Mémoires*, she admits that though she had "a prodigious extent of voice," she was but an indifferent musician, and notwithstanding the fact that the *Mercur*e of the following May contained a poem in which the writer declared that, so long as Clairon remained on earth, he was content to renounce his hopes of Heaven, her reception by the public seems to have left a good deal to be desired. We also gather that she was dissatisfied with the treatment she received from her colleagues—a fact which can hardly occasion surprise if there be any truth in the story that, immediately upon entering the Opera, she had publicly announced her intention of soundly boxing the ears of any lady who dared to address her by the odious name of "Frétillon,"—and soon determined to seek fame and fortune on another stage. "I had," she says, "the good fortune to succeed, but I found that so little talent was required in this theatre, in order to appear possessed of the highest abilities, there seemed to me to be so little merit in merely following the modulations of the musicians, the manners of the performers were so distasteful to me, and the smallness of the salary was so absolutely degrading, that, at the end of four months, I signified my intention of resigning."

From the Opera, Mlle. Clairon passed to the Comédie-Française, but not without encountering many obstacles by the way. Virtue counted for very little at the Académie Royale de Musique, except as a marketable commodity; it counted for a very great deal among the Comédiens du Roi, or rather they chose to pretend that it did, which came to much the same thing where

the admission of a damsel of questionable reputation was concerned. Led by her old employer, La Noue, and Mlle. Gaussin, several members of the troupe banded themselves together to oppose the admission of the now notorious "Frétillon" by every means in their power. The latter, on her side, did not lack for supporters, and, for some weeks, a war of pamphlets raged, in which the characters of the different combatants were torn to shreds, to the great delight of the town. Finally, the King's new mistress, Madame de Châteauroux, and her sister, Madame de Lauraguais, intervened on behalf of the young actress, who made so favourable an impression upon the old Duc de Gesvres, at an interview which, in his capacity as First Gentleman of the Chamber, he had very reluctantly accorded her, that, a few days later, she received the coveted *ordre de début*:—

"We, Duc de Gesvres, *pair de France*, First Gentleman of the King's Chamber, direct the troupe of his Majesty's French players to cause the demoiselle Clairon to forthwith make her *début*, in order that we may be able to judge of her abilities as an actress.

"(Signed) THE DUC DE GESVRES.

"*Executed at Versailles, September 10, 1743.*"<sup>1</sup>

In the provinces, Mlle. Clairon's *emploi* had been that of a *soubrette*, and her experience of tragedy was as yet very slight; for, though she was acquainted with some half-dozen of the leading tragic rôles, she had never played any of them more than twice. The *semainiers*, as a number of players who governed the Comédie in rotation were called, were, therefore, not a little sur-

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Campardon, *Les Comédiens du Roi de la Troupe française*.

prised when the young lady informed them that it was her intention to make her first appearance as a votary of Melpomene. But their surprise gave way to profound astonishment, when, after they had consented and suggested to her the parts of Constance in *Inès de Castro* or Aricie in *Phèdre*, the *débutante* replied, with a smile of disdain, that such parts were too small for her, and that it was her wish to play *Phèdre* herself—*Phèdre*, the most difficult character in the whole tragic répertoire; *Phèdre*, one of the most celebrated rôles of Mlle. Dumesnil!

“My proposal,” she tells us, “made every one smile; they assured me that the public would not suffer me to finish the first act. I became hot with indignation, but pride sustained me, and I replied as quietly and as majestically as I could: “Messieurs, you will allow me to play it, or you will not. I have the right to make my choice. I will either play *Phèdre* or nothing.”

In the end, she was permitted to have her way. According to her own account, she disdained to rehearse her part, and, on the fateful evening, September 19, 1743, did not arrive at the theatre until just before the curtain rose. The house was crowded, chiefly with persons who had come thither in the confident anticipation of enjoying a hearty laugh at what they were pleased to consider the absurd pretensions of little “Frétillon.” They came to laugh and perhaps to hiss; they remained to applaud, and to applaud enthusiastically, for, long before the first act was over, it was apparent to all that a great *tragédienne* was before them. “It was *Phèdre* herself in all her sovereign splendour, in all the majesty of passion,” and seldom indeed has that immortal queen of sorrow met with so worthy a representative. “The 19th of this month,” says the *Mercur*e, “the players have revived at



the theatre Racine's tragedy of *Phèdre*, in which Mlle. Clairon, a new actress, has made her *début*. She represented the principal personage amidst general applause. She is a young woman of much intelligence, who expresses with a very charming voice the sentiments which she has the art to understand. One may say that Nature has lavished upon her talents of the happiest order to enable her to fill all the characters suited to her youth, the agreeableness of her person, and her voice."

A little brochure, entitled *Lettre à Madame la Marquise V. de G—— sur le début de Mademoiselle Clairon à la Comédie-Française*, supplies us with an interesting portrait of the actress:—

"Mademoiselle Clairon is about twenty-two or twenty-three years of age. She is exceedingly fair; her head is well set. Her eyes are fine, full of fire, and sparkle with voluptuousness. Her mouth is furnished with beautiful teeth; her bosom is well formed. One gains in examining her a pleasure which the other senses share with the sight. Her figure is shapely, she carries herself very gracefully. A modest and pleasing manner interests one in her favour. Although she is not a finished beauty, one must resemble her to be charming. Her wit is sparkling, her conversation sweet and engaging. Musician and actress, lover of the arts and their pupil, she is qualified for everything, and, without making any effort, she becomes naturally whatever she wishes to be."<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. Clairon continued her *débuts* with success. On the following evening, she gave an admirable rendering of the part of *Zénobie*, and this was succeeded by further triumphs as *Ariane*, *Électre*, and the *Atalide* of *Bajazet*. She played also several important rôles in comedy, among

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Edmond de Goncourt.

them the Dorine of *Tartuffe*. But her acting here was distinctly inferior to her performances in tragedy; a circumstance which is not a little singular when we remember that the reputation she had brought with her from the provinces had been gained entirely in the former *genre*. Possibly, recognising that her true vocation was tragedy, she was now somewhat careless of the impression she might make in other rôles.

On October 29, 1743, an order from the Duc de Gesvres conferred on the young *débutante* a *demi-part* in the troupe of the Comédie-Française. In the following December, she was accorded a further quarter share, and, exactly a year later, obtained a full part.

The middle of the eighteenth century was the golden era of the Comédie-Française. What a galaxy of talent do we find there! Mesdemoiselles Clairon, Dumesnil, Gaussin, and Dangeville; Grandval, Molé, Lekain, Préville, and Brizard! Never before and never since have so many celebrated players appeared together upon one stage. And of this brilliant band, Mlle. Clairon was the ruler; ruling not so much by force of talent, for Mlle. Dumesnil had greater natural talent, nor by beauty, for Mlle. Gaussin was more beautiful, but by her remarkable intelligence, her unwearying industry, and her strength of will. Only Mlle. Dumesnil could compare with her upon the stage; off it, Mlle. Clairon reigned supreme.

For nearly twenty-two years, Mlle. Clairon disputed the dramatic sceptre with her celebrated rival, inferior to the latter in parts which required the combination of tragic force with pathos and tenderness, but incomparably her superior in characters of the sterner type, especially

those into which dignity and an element of lofty and inflexible pride entered.<sup>1</sup> The methods of the two great actresses could hardly have been more dissimilar. "The one was all temperament," says Edmond de Goncourt, "the other all study and art." Mlle. Dumesnil frequently came upon the stage with no very definite idea as to the tone or attitude she would assume in certain passages, trusting to a happy inspiration, which, it must be acknowledged, seldom failed her.<sup>2</sup> With Mlle. Clairon, who made her art the subject of the most profound and unremitting study, every tone and every gesture had been carefully rehearsed beforehand, and the character elaborated in its minutest details. So numerous indeed were her private rehearsals that she insensibly carried with her her theatrical air into private life, and her friends laughingly declared that she called for her fan and her coach in the tone of Agrippina, and spoke to her lackey like a queen addressing the captain of her guards.<sup>3</sup> But this artificiality was so dexterously concealed, she possessed in such a supreme degree the art of concealing art, so dignified and graceful were her movements, and so marvellous her command of facial expression, that even the warmest admirers of Mlle. Dumesnil and her school of acting and the most captious of critics were compelled to acknowledge her charm, while the ordinary playgoer was "transported with enthusiasm."

Tributes to her genius came from all quarters, from friend and foe, from her compatriots and from foreigners

<sup>1</sup> Hawkins, "The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century," i. 375.

<sup>2</sup> If Marmontel and Bachaumont are to be believed, this inspiration was as often as not aided by wine, and a servant, glass and bottle in hand, was always in attendance in the wings.

<sup>3</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 134.

alike. Voltaire, when she performed in his little theatre at Ferney, went quite wild with enthusiasm, and declared that, for the first time in his life, he had seen perfection in any kind.<sup>1</sup> Favart, though severely reprobating the extravagance of the admirers who had medals struck in the lady's honour,<sup>2</sup> cherished for her the most profound admiration. "Mlle. Clairon," he writes to the Count Durazzo, "is raised so far above criticism by the superiority of her talents that all the remarks of the most punctilious censor can but serve to convince me that she has attained the last degree of perfection. It seems as if she owed only to Nature all that she has acquired by assiduous study. Every day we are struck with some new admiration."

Collé, who disliked her heartily, partly no doubt on account of her friendship with the philosophers, writing in 1750, considers her inferior to Mlle. Dumesnil in sentimental scenes, but acknowledges her immense superiority to the latter "in parts requiring little energy and much dignity," such as the heroines of Corneille and the Fulvie of Crébillon's *Catiline*. He, however, severely criticises her delivery, which he describes as "artificial and inflated to the last extreme."

But, five years later, when Mlle. Clairon had adopted the more natural method of speaking and acting of which we shall presently speak, the dramatist is all admiration:—

"I have seen *L'Orphelin* [Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine*], and wept at the second and fifth acts. Mlle. Clairon appears to merit even more praise than she has received. It is the actress, and not the play, that has moved me. This tragedy is bad, and I do not retract

<sup>1</sup> See p. 334 *infra*.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 322 *infra*.

a single word of what I have said about it; but the actress is admirable. She improves every day; she is ridding herself little by little of her declamatory style, and making great strides towards natural acting. If she continues, she will attain to the art of the Lecouvreur. The progress which she has made is too marked and too astonishing for us not to expect still further improvement; perhaps we may even hope for perfection.”<sup>1</sup>

The *Réflexions sur la déclamation* of Hérault de Séchelles contain a striking testimony to that wonderful command of expression, the result of a profound study of physiognomy, which enabled her, without opening her lips, to convey to her audience an exact impression of the different phases of emotion through which her mind happened to be passing.

“One day, Mlle. Clairon seated herself in an arm-chair, and, without uttering a single word, she painted, with her countenance alone, all the passions: hatred, rage, indignation, indifference, melancholy, grief, love, pity, gaiety. She painted not only the passions themselves, but all the shades and differences which characterise them. In terror, for example, she expressed dismay, fear, embarrassment, surprise, uneasiness. When we expressed our admiration, she replied that she had made a special study of anatomy, and knew what muscles it was necessary to call into play.”

And listen to Oliver Goldsmith’s tribute, which appeared in the second number of *The Bee* :—

“Mlle. Clairon, a celebrated actress at Paris, seems to me the most perfect female figure I have ever seen on any stage. Her first appearance is excessively engaging; she never comes in staring round upon the company,

<sup>1</sup> “*Journal et Mémoires*,” ii. 33.

as if she intended to count the benefits of the house, or, at least, to see as well as to be seen. Her eyes are always at first intently fixed upon the persons of the drama, and then she lifts them by degrees, with enchanting diffidence, upon the spectators. Her first speech, or at least the first part of it, is delivered with scarce any motion of the arm; her hands and her tongue never set out together, but one prepares for the other. . . . By this simple beginning, she gives herself a power of rising to the passion of the scene. As she proceeds, every gesture, every look, acquires new violence; till at last, transported, she fills the whole vehemence of the play and the whole idea of the poet. Her hands are not alternately stretched out and then drawn in again, as with the singing women at Sadler's Wells; they are employed with graceful variety, and every moment please with new and unexpected eloquence. Add to this, that their motion is generally from the shoulder; she never flourishes her hands while the upper part of the arm is motionless; nor has she the ridiculous appearance as if her elbows were pinned to her hips."

But perhaps the most interesting of all eulogies of the actress is contained in a letter to Garrick by his Danish correspondent, Sturtz—a really masterly description, which suffers but little from the fact of the writer being a foreigner, and which we, therefore, need make no apology for producing at length:—

"In such a representing nation, I had a great opinion of their stage, and yet I was disappointed. It seems the quality has forestalled the best parts for them alone, for I saw but an indifferent medley of plays.

"There is, indeed, Mme. Clairon, standing alone



*Hippolyte de la Tude Clairon.*

*Gravure donnée par le Roi à Clairon.*

*Une gravure le Cabinet royal de Paris. Paris, chez la Citoyenne, par la Citoyenne.*

# MADemoisELLE CLAIROn

From an engraving by LAURENT CARS and JACQUES BEAUVARLET, after the painting by CARLE VAN LOO





amidst the ruins of the Republic, shooting for the last rays of a departing star. I have gazed on her when she trod the stage as Queen of Carthage,<sup>1</sup> worthy that rank and above the mob of queens; she inspired every sentiment; she displays every passion, and, I dare say, she felt none: all the storm was on the surface, waves ran high, and the bottom was calm; her despair and her grief rose and died at the end of her tongue.

“ . . . She goes through a number of opposite feelings: soft melancholy, despair, languid tenderness, raving fury, scorn, and melting love; there is not one passion absent. She is wonderful in those transitions where an inferior actress, from an intense grief, would, at some lucky event, jump on a sudden to a giddy, wanton joy. Mme. Clairon, though exulting at her new-born hope that Æneas might stay, keeps always the dark colour of sorrow; when her eye brightens through her tears, she looks, as Ossian expresses it, ‘like the moon through a watery cloud.’ Her characteristic perfection is the scornful, the commanding part; then is nobility spread about her as a glory round the head of a saint; and yet she never puts off the woman; in the midst of violent rage she is always the tender female, and a *nuance* of love softens the hard colour into harmony.

“ . . . Nature has done a good deal in favour of Madame Clairon; her voice is melody, of a vast extent, and capable of numberless inflexions; however, I was sometimes unwillingly disturbed by a disagreeable shrill cry, rather expressing physical pain. As to her figure, it is not a very elegant one, her head being rather too big and her whole person too little; and yet she is great, towering amongst the crowd in the height of

<sup>1</sup> In Le Franc de Pompignan's *Didon*.

action; <sup>1</sup> so as you see by the enchantment of art a colossal head of Jupiter in a cameo the size of sixpence. Were I in a temper to find fault with her, I might mention her too articulate declamation, the *cadence* of every motion; but then I might as well charge Raphael with having too carefully marked his contours, which are the admiration and the models of every age. True it is that compound of excellence is a mere compound of art; were it possible to note action, as music, then she would show a fortnight before every mien, the measure of every tone, the tension of every march on paper. She is else quite free from that disagreeable tragical hiccup so epidemical in France, and so awkwardly returning at the end of every verse; she never shakes so affectedly her head, as some others, in what you call the graceful style, forsooth; and she alone may venture some bold strokes, which would never do else with so well-bred, so elegant an audience.

“So when she heard that all was lost, that Æneas was gone, then, in the rage of despair, with her two hands across, she beat her forehead with such a gloomy, death-threatening look that we all stood aghast, and her cry raised horror in every breast. I cannot say that she killed herself well, though, but she died well; her weakening voice was not a childish, whining tone, but imminent dissolution altered it, convulsion raised it,

<sup>1</sup> Madame Vestris, when a girl, was taken to visit Mlle. Clairon, who appeared to her “a little woman about forty years of age, who had once been pretty.” Some days later, she went to the Comédie-Française to witness a performance of *Andromaque*, and, when she saw the celebrated actress in the part of Hermione, cried in astonishment: “That is not Mlle. Clairon!” She was assured that it was, but flatly refused to believe, saying: “See how tall that actress is! I have seen Mlle. Clairon at her house; she is a very little woman.” It was Mlle. Clairon none the less.—Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 171.

and so it vanished into the air as a vapour. There, then, I have brought her to the highest pitch of glory of your tribe, self-murder; may she now quietly repose!"<sup>1</sup>

And Garrick replies, laying his finger, with unerring instinct, upon the one weak spot in Mlle. Clairon's acting:—

"What shall I say to you, my dear friend, about 'the Clairon.' Your dissection of her is as accurate as if you had opened her alive; she has everything that art and a good understanding, with great natural spirit, can give her. But there I fear (and I only tell you my fears and open my soul to you) the heart has none of those instantaneous feelings, that life-blood, that keen sensibility, that bursts at once from genius, and, like electrical fire, shoots through the veins, marrow, bones, and all, of every spectator. Madame Clairon is so conscious and so certain of what she can do, that she never, I believe, had the feelings of the instant come upon her unexpectedly; but I pronounce that the greatest strokes of genius have been unknown to the actor himself till circumstances and the warmth of the scene has sprung the mine, as it were, as much to his own surprise as to that of the audience. Thus I make a great difference between a great genius and a good actor. The first will always realise the feelings of his character, and be transported beyond himself; while the other, with great powers and good sense, will give great pleasure to an audience, but never

——" *'Pectus inaniter angit,  
Irritat, mulcet, falsis terroribus implet,  
Ut magus.'*

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<sup>1</sup> "Private Correspondence of David Garrick," i. 356.

"I have with great freedom communicated my ideas of acting, but you must not betray me, my good friend; the Clairon would never forgive me, though I called her an excellent actress, if I did not swear by all the gods that she was the greatest genius too." <sup>1</sup>

Space forbids us to give more than a brief account of the many triumphs of this superb *tragédienne*, who, besides worthily sustaining all the chief characters of the classic répertoire, created forty-three rôles, in not one of which did she fail to uphold her reputation, while the great majority were brilliantly successful. Among the former, she was probably seen to most advantage in *Médée*—in which character Carle Van Loo painted her in his celebrated portrait—*Phèdre*, *Hermione*, *Zénobie*, *Didon*, and *Cléopâtre*. Among the latter, taking them in chronological order, should be mentioned *Arétie* in the *Denys le Tyran* of Marmontel; *Fulvie* in Crébillon's *Catalina*; *Azéma* in the *Sémiramis* of Voltaire; *Électre* in the *Oreste* of the same writer; *Cassandre* in Chateaubrun's play, *Les Troyennes*; *Idamé* in Voltaire's *Orphelin de la Chine*; *Astarbé* in the tragedy of that name, by Colardeau; *Aménaïde* in the *Tancredé* of Voltaire; and *Aliénor* in De Belloy's *Siège de Calais*, during the run of which last play occurred the unfortunate incident which led to her retirement from the stage.

The almost fanatical admiration which Voltaire cherished for the actress was no doubt, in part, due to the fact that she had contributed so largely to the success of his plays. If Collé is to be believed, she "made" his *Orphelin de la Chine*, while as the tender

<sup>1</sup> "Private Correspondence of David Garrick," ii. 359.

and fiery Aménaïde of *Tancrède* (September 3, 1760), she appears to have held the audience absolutely enthralled. "Ah! *mon cher maître*," writes Diderot to the exile of Ferney, "if you could see her crossing the stage, half-leaning upon the executioners who surround her, her knees giving way beneath her, her eyes closed, her arms hanging down, as though in death; if you could hear her cry on recognising Tancrède, you would be convinced, more than ever, that silence and pantomime have sometimes a pathos which all the resources of oratory cannot attain. Open your portfolios and look at Poussin's *Esther paraissant devant l'Assuérus*: it is Clairon on her way to execution."<sup>1</sup>

The *Mercur*e—the staid *Mercur*e, so chary of its praise—can find no word to describe her acting but that of sublime. The advocate Barbier, voicing the opinion of the average playgoer, declares that "Mlle. Clairon carried the talent of tragic declamation to a point which had never been witnessed before"; while d'Alembert writes: "Mlle. Clairon has been incomparable and beyond anything that she has yet attained to."

To the great disappointment of the public, the health of Mlle. Clairon necessitated the temporary withdrawal of the play after the thirteenth performance, and, when it was revived in the following January, the enthusiasm with which it was received was almost indescribable.

Simultaneously with her celebrity as an actress, Mlle. Clairon enjoyed a celebrity of another, and far less enviable, kind. "Love," she remarks, in her *Mémoires*, "is one of Nature's needs; and I satisfied it." She did indeed. "Hardly had she appeared on

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Adolphe Jullien, *L'Histoire du costume au Théâtre*.

the [Paris] stage," writes La Janière to the Lieutenant of Police, in the report to which we have already had occasion to refer, "than every one began to fight for her, and the crowd of lovers was so great that, in spite of her inclination towards gallantry, she was embarrassed to choose among them." There were princes and dukes; there were marquises, and barons, and counts; there were impecunious chevaliers and wealthy farmer-generals; there were dashing cavalry-officers and sober presidents of the Parliament; there were actors and men of letters. And few indeed—that is to say, few who possessed any passport to her favour: high rank, a handsome presence, a pretty wit, or, best of all, a well-lined purse and a disposition to empty it at her feet,<sup>1</sup> seemed to have sighed in vain.

Poor M. de la Popelinière, to whose good offices Mlle. Clairon had owed her admission to the Opera, did not long retain his proud position of *amant en titre*. He was speedily abandoned for the Prince de Soubise, who, however, was only accorded a fourth share of the lady's heart, the remainder of that priceless organ being divided between three other high and puissant *seigneurs*, the Ducs de Luxembourg and de Bouteville and the Marquis de Bissy. Next Mlle. de Camargo's old lover, the Président de Rieux, succeeded in securing a monopoly of the *tragédienne's* affections, only to lose them, however, the moment he showed a disinclination to loosen his purse-strings. Then came an assortment of admirers, drawn from the nobility, the Parliament, financial circles, the stage, the army, and foreign visitors to Paris, and

<sup>1</sup> In her *Mémoires*, Mlle. Clairon has the effrontery to declare that she never had any cause to be ashamed of her love-affairs, and defies any one to name "a single man who had purchased her favours."

including the "Baron de Kervert," who is described as a rich Englishman, but whom we have failed to identify; a Polish nobleman, the Comte de Brotok, "who made a brave show before he became acquainted with her, but, in less than four months, had lost coach, diamonds, and snuff-box, and was obliged to pretend that he was in mourning for one of his relations, in order to appear without shame in a black coat;" the actor Grandval, who had had more *bonnes fortunes* than he could count, but who proved so accommodating an admirer that, after a few months of the lady's society, "his colleagues had to accord him a benefit performance in order to re-establish his affairs, which had fallen into a disastrous condition;" and, finally, the Baron de Besenval, whose reputation for gallantry was, in later years, to compromise Marie Antoinette, and "with whom," says La Janière, "she became infatuated."<sup>1</sup>

For Besenval indeed, with whom she had had a previous *liaison* during her career in the provinces, Mlle. Clairon, to judge by her letters, appears to have entertained a genuine affection. In one epistle, "she conjures him to love her for ever"; in another, she informs him that a letter which she has just received from him has "restored her to life," and that, however much he may love her, his passion must of necessity be inferior to hers; and, in a third, declares that the devotion she feels for him has "spoiled her taste" for other admirers, and that she "experiences more pleasure in being true to him, whether he desires it or not, than she formerly had in being unfaithful."<sup>2</sup>

But let us listen to some of the reports of the Argus-

<sup>1</sup> Ravaillon, *Archives de la Bastille*, xii. 348.

<sup>2</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 43 *et seq.*

eyed agents of the Lieutenant of Police, which prove what an important personage a fashionable actress was in those days:—

“SAINT-MARC TO BERRYER.

“*June 14, 1748.*

“I have the honour to report to you that the trustworthy person whom I introduced into Mlle. Clairon’s house assures me that the Prince de Monaco, since his return to his regiment, has not allowed a single day to pass without writing to Clairon; he shows much affection for her, and, among other things, he begs her constantly not to return to the stage until her health is perfectly re-established, and to remember that she has promised to take every care of her life, in order to prolong his . . .

“D’Hugues de Giversac, who is very much in love with Clairon, and is reputed to have enjoyed her favours, has made all sorts of attempts to gain admission to the house, but I am assured that there is no possibility of his succeeding, and that Clairon’s door is closed to him. It has been remarked that, since the departure of the prince, she has not received any one, except actors and actresses and, frequently, an old attorney, who is a friend of Clairon’s father. Moreover, she does not go out, except to Mass, and, since her illness, it does not appear that the prince has any rivals. It has been said that D’Hugues was one, but the demoiselle’s conduct for some time past renders that improbable.

“It has been remarked that Clairon only goes out with her father and sister, or some actors. She always makes great cheer and spends large sums on her table.



She is daily expecting the arrival of the prince and his money. I continue the precautions necessary to enable me to operate successfully the moment the prince appears."

"SAINT-MARC to BERRYER.

"June 23, 1748.

"I have the honour to report to you that Mlle. Clairon received yesterday evening a letter from the Prince de Monaco, in which he informs her that he will arrive without fail at the end of next week. But Clairon considers that this is a feint on his part, and that he will arrive sooner, in order to surprise her. Apart from that, nothing of importance has happened at this house. The demoiselle does not go out, nor does she receive any one, save the members of her troupe and the old person of whom I have spoken."

"SAINT-MARC to BERRYER.

"August 10, 1748.

"I have the honour to report to you that nothing likely to be of interest to you is taking place at the house of the demoiselle Clairon. She often sees her comrades of the Comédie, with whom she always makes good cheer.

"There is a foreigner whose name I have not been able to ascertain, who has employed a woman called Caron, formerly an *entremetteuse*, to speak in his favour. This foreigner, although he is not acquainted with her, has sent to Clairon a piece of Indian taffeta, a great quantity of chocolate and champagne, and a service of porcelain encrusted with gold, which presents were

entrusted to one of Clairon's servants, with a letter from the foreigner, promising her a considerable allowance, if she will become his mistress. The story goes that she wrote to the Prince de Monaco, to inform him of the advantageous proposal she had received from this foreigner. The prince despatched, on the instant, an old confidential servant, with instructions, in writing, enjoining on the demoiselle Clairon to return everything which she had received from this foreigner. The demoiselle found herself in an exceedingly embarrassing position, inasmuch as she had disposed of more than half the presents, having converted them into cash. Since then, the prince's confidential servant has remained in Paris, to keep an eye upon her behaviour, until the moment of the arrival of his master, who has been very impatiently expected for more than a month."<sup>1</sup>

"MEUNIER to BERRYER.

"September 18, 1748.

"The demoiselle Clairon has for a long time been the mistress of [the Marquis] de Cindré. At the end of the month of August, she asked him for a sum of 2000 livres,<sup>2</sup> of which she stood in pressing need. He gave her this sum.

"Some days later, she demanded of M. de Cindré a country-house. He could refuse her nothing, and rented one for her at Pantin, which he furnished magnificently.

<sup>1</sup> Ravaisson, *Archives de la Bastille*, xii. 292 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> Ravaisson, *Archives de la Bastille*, xii. 295. From the same report we learn that the Prince of Würtemberg, then on a visit to Paris, had fallen violently in love with Mlle. Gaussin, "*et qu'il a commencé par lui faire un présent de 200 louis pour souper avec elle.*" Mlle. Clairon was probably no worse than the other divinities of the Comédie.

“ M. de Cindré went to visit her one evening, and, to give her an agreeable surprise, entered by a back door, and found the demoiselle Clairon with a young man. . . . He withdrew, without speaking to any one, and without his presence being discovered. The following day, he sent and removed the furniture which he had placed in the house, and abandoned Mlle. Clairon.

“ The young man in question is M. de Jaucourt, an officer of dragoons, who, about two months ago, was arrested for being absent from his regiment without leave.”

Under date October 23, 1748, we come to an entry of considerable interest :—

“ The demoiselle Clairon has dismissed the Marquis de Thibouville. She has replaced him by the sieur Marmontel, author of *Denis le Tyran*. He is not recognisable since he has devoted himself to amusing this girl.”<sup>1</sup>

The beginning of the *liaison* between Mlle. Clairon and the author of the *Contes moraux*, which the latter relates, with much complacency, in his ever-delightful *Mémoires*, written, by the way, “ for the instruction of his children,” is distinctly amusing.

Marmontel had been in love with a certain Mlle. Navarre, whose heart he had stolen away from Maurice de Saxe, much to the indignation of the famous Marshal,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Archives*, xii. 295.

<sup>2</sup> This was not the only occasion upon which Marmontel trespassed upon Maurice’s preserves. He took a similar liberty with the heart of Mlle. de Verrières, “ on learning which the Marshal fell into a passion unworthy of so great a man.”

and who had made of him "the happiest of lovers and the most miserable of slaves." One day, he learned that his enchantress had jilted him, in his turn, for the Chevalier de Mirabeau, upon which he went home, "fell down like a sacrificed victim," and was for some time alarmingly ill. Mlle. Clairon came to console him, when the following conversation took place:—

"‘My friend,’ said she, ‘your heart needs some object of love; you feel listless, because it is empty. You must interest; you must fill it. Is there not a woman in the world whom you can think agreeable?’

"‘I know,’ said I, ‘only one who could comfort me if she chose, but would she be so generous.’

"‘We must see as to that,’ replied she, with a smile. ‘Am I acquainted with her? I will endeavour to assist you.’

"‘Yes, you know her, and have great influence over her.’

"‘Well, what is her name? I will speak to her in your favour; I will say that you love with ardour and sincerity; that you can be faithful and constant; that she is sure of being happy in your love.’

"‘So you really believe all this?’

"‘Yes; I am fully persuaded of it.’

"‘Be so good as to say it to yourself.’

"‘To myself, my friend?’

"‘To yourself.’

"‘Ah! then it shall be my pride to comfort you.’"<sup>1</sup>

A connection was thus formed, which, though it did not last very long—at least the love-affair did not—<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Marmontel* (edit. 1804), i. 266.

<sup>2</sup> Marmontel tells us that Mlle. Clairon made "a very desirable mistress." "She had," says he, "all the charms of an agreeable

was not without its influence upon the professional careers of both. Marmontel tells us that his passion for the actress had the effect of "rekindling his poetical ardour"; while, on her side, Mlle. Clairon was induced by the representations of the young author to adopt a more natural style of acting, which may be said to have given the finishing touch to an art which came nearer perfection than anything yet seen on the French stage, and, moreover, opened the door for a reform the importance of which can scarcely be overestimated.

Marmontel had repeatedly urged upon the *tragédienne* the advisability of aiming at greater simplicity, pointing out that her acting was "too splendid, too impetuous," and was wanting in suppleness and truth. "You possess," said he, "every means of excelling in your art, and yet, great as you are, you might easily rise above yourself, purely by using more temperately those powers of which you are so prodigal. You cite to me your own brilliant successes and those which you have gained for me; you cite the opinion and the advice of your friends; you cite the opinion of M. de Voltaire, who himself recites his lines with emphasis, and who pretends that declamation requires the same pomp as style; while I, in return, can only urge an irresistible feeling that declamation, like style, may be dignified, majestic, tragic, and yet simple; that tones, in order to be

character without any mixture of caprice; while her only desire, her most delicate attentions, were directed towards rendering her lover happy. So long as she loved, no one could be more faithful or more tender than she. . . . I left her charming, I found her equally, and, if possible, still more charming. What a pity that with so seductive a character so much levity should be joined, and that love so sincere, and even so faithful, should not have been more constant!"

animated and deeply affecting, require gradations, shades, unforeseen and sudden transitions, which they can never have when strained and laboured."

Mlle. Clairon laughingly replied that she saw plainly that he would never let her alone until she had adopted a tone and manner more suited to comedy than to tragedy. To which Marmontel rejoined that this she could never do, since her voice, her look, her pronunciation, her gestures, her attitudes, were all instinctively dignified and majestic, and that, if she would but consent to be natural, her tragic powers could not fail to be enhanced.

For a long while, the actress refused to be persuaded; but, finally, in 1752, after Marmontel had, for some time, ceased to urge her, she resolved to follow his counsels. Judging it best to make her first essays in the new method before a public less critical and less conservative than that of Paris, she obtained permission to visit Bordeaux, where, in addition, she would have the advantage of performing in a theatre more suited to the style she proposed to adopt than the large *salle* of the Comédie-Française. On her first evening at Bordeaux, she appeared as Phèdre, and played the part in the way she had always been accustomed to perform it in Paris, that is to say, with much extravagance of tone and gesture. She was, of course, loudly applauded. The next day, she appeared as Agrippine, and played the character from beginning to end in conformity with the ideas which she had recently adopted.

"This simple, easy, and natural style of acting," she tells us, "at first surprised them. An accelerated mode of utterance at the end of each couplet, and a regular gradation of vehemence had been usually the signals

for applause; they knew that it had only been usual to applaud such passages; and, as I did not resort to the style to which they had become accustomed, I was not applauded." As the play proceeded, however, the attitude of the audience underwent a change; murmurs of "*Mais cela est beau! Cela est beau!*" began to make themselves heard; and, when the curtain fell, the actress received a perfect ovation.

"After this," she continues, "I represented thirty-two of my different characters, and always in my newly-adopted style. Ariane was of the number, and the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, under the subject *Déclamation*, have been kind enough to transmit to posterity the very marked and flattering homage which I received. However, being still fearful, and doubting the judgment of the public, as well as my own, I determined to perform Phèdre as I had played it at first, and I saw, to my delight, that they were dissatisfied with it. I had courage enough to say that it was an experiment which I had believed it to be my duty to make, and that I would play the same character differently, if they would grant me the favour of a third performance. I obtained permission, adopted the style which was the result of my studies as completely as I could, and every one agreed that there was no comparison."

Encouraged by the success which had attended her experiments at Bordeaux, Mlle. Clairon forthwith determined to try the effect of the new method upon Paris and Versailles.

One day, when she was to play Roxane in the little theatre at Versailles, Marmontel, happening to come to her dressing-room, was surprised to find her attired like a sultana, without *panier*, her arms half-bare, and, in

short, in correct Oriental costume. He complimented her upon her appearance, upon which she told him of her experience at Bordeaux, adding: "I am going to try it again in this small theatre. Come and hear me, and if it be as successful here, adieu to the old declamation!"

The result, Marmontel tells us, exceeded their most sanguine anticipations. "It was no longer the actress, but Roxane herself, who was seen and heard." The aristocratic audience were delighted, and applauded her warmly. After the play, her friend went to congratulate her upon her success. "Ah!" said she, "don't you see that I am undone? In all my characters the costume must now be observed; the truth of dress must be conjoined with that of acting. All my costly theatrical wardrobe must from this moment be changed; I lose clothes to the value of 10,000 crowns; but the sacrifice is made. You shall see me within a week perform *Électre* as naturally as I have just played Roxane."

She was as good as her word. It was the *Électre* of Crébillon. "In place of the ridiculous *panier* and wide mourning gown which she had been accustomed to wear," says Marmontel, "she appeared in the simple dress of a slave, with her hair dishevelled, and long chains upon her arms. She was admirable, and, some time afterwards, she was still more sublime in the *Électre* of Voltaire. Voltaire had made her recite this part with an unvaried and doleful monotony; but, when spoken naturally, it acquired a beauty unknown to himself. On hearing it acted at his theatre at Ferney, where she went to visit him, he exclaimed, bathed in tears and transported with admiration, 'It is not I who am the author of that—it is herself; she has created the part.'



And, indeed, the infinity of shades which she introduced, and the manner in which she expressed the passions, rendered it perhaps, of all others, that in which she was the most astonishing.”<sup>1</sup>

Paris, as well as Versailles, was quick to recognise in this change the genuine tragic tone, and the enormously increased appearance of probability which theatrical performances derive from a due observation of costume. Thus, from one reform sprang another, and, warmly supported by the celebrated actor Lekain,<sup>2</sup> who was keenly alive to the absurdity of dressing the characters of ancient Greece and Rome in a half-modern fashion,

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Marmontel* (edit. 1804), ii. 41 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> Lekain had made his *début* at the Comédie-Française on September 14, 1750, as Titus in the *Brutus* of Voltaire. His admission into the company was bitterly opposed by Mlle. Clairon, who gave no other reason for her hostility than that his personal appearance—he was a remarkably plain man, short and thick-set, with a harsh voice and rough manners—was displeasing to her. Lekain retaliated by giving publicity to certain episodes in the lady’s private life which did not redound to her credit. To which Mlle. Clairon rejoined by addressing him before the assembled company as follows: “I was well aware, Monsieur, that you were a man of repulsive appearance, but I did not know that you possessed a soul a thousand times more hideous than your person.” Lekain left the theatre in a towering passion, and, with the assistance of another enemy of Mlle. Clairon, the Chevalier de la Morlière, composed a letter, “the most insulting, the most atrocious, that it was possible to conceive,” which he sent to the actress. For this he was expelled from the Comédie, but subsequently, on writing another letter, this time of apology, reinstated. Soon after this affair, which was common knowledge, Lekain happened to be playing Æneas to the Dido of Mlle. Clairon, in Le Franc de Pompignan’s tragedy. In one of the most touching passages of the play, the ill-fated queen, addressing her faithless lover, exclaims:—

“Je devrais te haïr, ingrat ! Et je t’adore.”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth, than the whole pit burst into such peals of merriment that it was fully five minutes before the performance could be continued.

Mlle. Clairon was able to effect a veritable revolution. Henceforth, the actors were forced to abandon their *tonnelets*, their fringed gloves, their voluminous periwigs, their plumed hats, and all the rest of the trappings which one sees in Liotard's engraving of Watteau's picture, *Les Comédiens Français*; and this new desire for truth ere long extended to the scenery and all the accessories.

Voltaire's *Orphelin de la Chine*, produced on August 20, 1754, where, in the part of Idamé, Mlle. Clairon secured one of her most brilliant triumphs,<sup>1</sup> was the first play in which they ventured to act on their ideas. "On returning from Fontainebleau," writes Collé, "this tragedy has been revived, and has had nine representations. I omitted to mention that the players have been put to some expense. They have had a scene painted, or, to speak more correctly, a palace, in the Chinese fashion; they have also observed the costumes of the country in their dress. The women wore Chinese gowns, were without *paniers* and ruffles, and had their arms bare. Clairon even affected foreign gesticulations, placing frequently one hand or both on her hips; holding for some moments her clenched fist to her forehead, and so forth. The men, according to the characters they represented, were attired as Tartars or Chinamen."<sup>2</sup> The effect was excellent."<sup>3</sup>

Mlle. Clairon was not content with restoring to the figures of the past their correct costume; she sought to make them live again in all the distinctiveness of their times, their countries, and their nationality. To be a

<sup>1</sup> See p. 294 *supra*.

<sup>2</sup> Grimm says that Voltaire surrendered to the players his share of the profits, in order to help them to defray the expense of the costumes.

<sup>3</sup> *Journal et Mémoires*, ii. 33.

great tragic actor or actress, it was not enough, in her opinion, to have a sonorous voice, a majestic presence, a dignified carriage, enthusiasm, and dramatic intelligence; it was necessary for the player "to transport himself into the times and the places where the characters which he was representing had lived," to recover, in fact, a little of the spirit of Rome, Sparta, or Athens. "Not only," says she, in her *Mémoires*, "ought one to acquaint oneself with the history of all the peoples of the world, but to investigate it thoroughly; to render oneself familiar with it, even in the minutest details; to adapt to each rôle the peculiarities which the nation to which the character belonged ought to exhibit."

Such a result could, of course, only be attained by constant study; and she herself was an indefatigable student of historical works and the classics, as well as of statues, monuments, and portraits; and unsparing in her condemnation of those members of her profession who were too indolent or too careless to follow her example. Grimm relates an imaginary conversation between Mlle. Clairon and a young actor, which Mme. d'Épinay declared that she had dreamed, and which, no doubt, correctly illustrates the *tragédienne's* views on this subject.

The young actor has come to enlist Mlle. Clairon's good offices to secure him a *début* at the Comédie-Française, and the following conversation takes place:—

"Have you yet appeared at any theatre?"

"No, Mademoiselle."

"Well! no matter; your face interests me. Be seated, Monsieur, and let us talk. . . . Ah! go and fetch me my work-basket from yonder console, at the end of the room, so that I may see you walk, if you

please—over there, near that Japanese ornament. . . . Monsieur, I thank you. That is satisfactory; your movements are easy; you have no stiffness, nor ungainliness; but you have no distinction. Have you never had occasion to observe men of quality in society? What, Monsieur, are the characters in which you are most proficient, and which you propose that I should listen to?"

"Mademoiselle, that of Nero in *Britannicus*."

"Is that the only one? Well, Monsieur, before I listen to you, have the kindness to tell me who Nero was."

"Mademoiselle, he was an emperor who lived at Rome."

"That he lived at Rome is correct. But was he a Roman emperor, or did he reside at Rome for pleasure? How did he rise to be emperor? What were his claims, his birth, his parents, his education, his character, his inclinations, his virtues, his vices?"

"Mademoiselle, the rôle of Nero answers some of your questions, but not all."

"Monsieur, it is necessary to answer not only these questions, but all the further ones that I shall ask you. And how can you play the part of Nero, or any other that you wish to, unless you are as well acquainted with the life of the personage whom you are representing as with your own?"

"I was under the impression, Mademoiselle, that in order to grasp the sense of his rôle, it was quite sufficient to be acquainted with the play."

"And you were under a wrong impression, Monsieur."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, cited by Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, 131 et seq.

In the midst of her histrionic triumphs, Mlle. Clairon continued her career of gallantry. To Marmontel succeeded the Bailli de Fleury, "understudied" by a M. de Villeguillon, an officer of Musketeers. Soon both these gentlemen were discarded in favour of the Marquis de Ximenès, a young man of twenty-five, with a considerable fortune. The marquis, who was by way of being a poet, began his wooing by inditing sonnets to the lady's eyes, which, however, were very coldly received. Thereupon, changing his tactics, he sent her a Périgueux *pâté*, in which he had caused to be inserted, in the guise of truffles, six rouleaux of fifty louis each. The rouleaux were much more to Mlle. Clairon's taste than the verses had been, and, when her generous admirer presented himself that evening, her door was no longer closed to him.

The marquis loved the lady very dearly. For her sake, he abandoned a former enchantress of the name of Mainville, "who had already plucked some of his feathers." For her sake, he parted with a fine estate in Champagne and laid the proceeds at her feet. And every day he came to visit her "in an equipage of the most brilliant description, with two tall lackeys in the rumble, and a running footman preceding it, all superbly habited."<sup>1</sup>

Finally, however, she killed his love with a *bon mot*. A fair colleague in the green-room, with whom she was having words, happened to remark that Monsieur le Marquis had turned Mademoiselle's head. "Yes," snapped the actress, "away from him." M. de Ximenès, be it said, was not an Adonis.

<sup>1</sup> "Report of Meunier to the Lieutenant of Police;" Ravaisson, *Archives de la Bastille*, xii. 367.

This injudicious speech was duly reported to the marquis, who, stung to the quick, quitted the lady for ever. Mlle. Clairon wrote demanding the return of a portrait of herself which she had given him. It came, and, with it, these cruel verses :—

“Tout s’use, tout périt, tu le prouves, Clairon ;  
Ce pastel dont tu m’a fait don,  
Du temps a ressenti l’outrage  
Il t’en ressemble davantage.”<sup>1</sup>

To M. de Ximenès succeeded a gentleman who, for some time, baffled the curiosity of Berryer’s inspectors by invariably visiting the actress under cover of night, in a hackney-coach, and with his features concealed by a cloak. Ultimately, it transpired that the mysterious admirer was the Marquis de Bauffremont, who having recently married—and not for love—a lady of a very jealous disposition, had strong reasons for desiring to hide his identity.<sup>2</sup>

The discreet M. de Bauffremont was followed by yet another marquis ; he of Rochechouart—Mlle. Clairon appears to have been extremely partial to noblemen of this particular rank—and, finally, the lady formed a *liaison* with Joseph Alphonse Omer, Comte de Valbelle d’Oraison, “who had received from Nature all the graces that go to the making of an amiable man, and whom Chance had made the richest noble in Provence.”<sup>3</sup>

Let us hasten to add that here, at any rate, Mlle. Clairon seems to have experienced a genuine passion, which was undoubtedly reciprocated ; for her *liaison* with

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*, i. 377.

<sup>2</sup> Report of Meunier to Berryer, Lieutenant of Police, *Archives de la Bastille*, xii.

<sup>3</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 170.

the Comte de Valbelle lasted for nineteen years, and, as we shall presently see, might have been regularised, had the actress been so disposed.

With her triumph in the *Aménarde* of *Tancrède*, of which we have spoken elsewhere, Mlle. Clairon reached the height of her fame. She ruled with despotic sway not only the theatre, but the world of fashion as well. At her house, in the Rue des Marais—the same house which had been successively occupied by Marie de Champmeslé, Racine, and Adrienne Lecouvreur—she received the cream of the society of both Court and capital:<sup>1</sup> Mesdames d'Aiguillon, de Villeroi, de la Vallière, de Forcalquier, and others; and in turn, was a frequent guest at their tables and also at that of Madame du Deffand. The Princess Galitzin, wife of the Russian Ambassador at the Court of Vienna, formed so deep an attachment for the actress that she “could not spend two hours without seeing her or writing to her.” It was she who commissioned Carle Van Loo to paint his celebrated portrait of Mlle. Clairon as Medea,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We read in Mlle. Clairon's *Mémoires*: “‘The walls alone of this house,’ I said to myself, ‘ought to make me feel the sublimity of the poet, and enable me to attain the talent of the actress. It is in this sanctuary that I ought to live and die.’” We fear that the sanctuary was, on occasion, somewhat profaned, since the lady was in the habit of entertaining here not only dames of high degree, but some of the most dissolute members of Paris society.

<sup>2</sup> “M. Carle Van Loo's picture, in which Mlle. Clairon is painted as Medea, had a great reputation while it was still unfinished. Hardly had the artist opened his studio, than all Paris crowded to admire his *chef d'œuvre*. Never did work obtain more unanimous praise.”—*Le Tableau de Mlle. Clairon, par M. Carle Vanloo*, a manuscript document cited by Edmond de Goncourt. When it was nearly completed, Louis XV. expressed a wish to see it, and came to Van Loo's studio,

and presented it to the actress. It was she, too, who, in 1759, persuaded the Russian Court to invite the great actress to leave France and take up her residence at St. Petersburg. The terms offered were extremely tempting,<sup>1</sup> and Mlle. Clairon hesitated long before refusing them. But her passion for the Comte de Valbelle was then at its height, and she could not reconcile herself to the idea of being separated from her lover. Then the count offered to make her his wife, and accompany her to Russia, and so anxious was the Czarina Elizabeth to secure the services of the *tragédienne*, that she promised, through the Princess Galitzin, to accord him the same rank as he held in France, "and the emoluments necessary to sustain it." Mlle. Clairon, however, fell ill, and illness gave her time for reflection. She remembered that she was seven years older than her lover, who was a very gallant gentleman indeed, and very far from an example of fidelity; as her charms waned, she could hardly flatter herself that he would become more constant. She remembered, too, the difference in station; she thought of the indignation of the count's family, and she asked herself whether, in years to come, he would not reproach her with having taken him at his word.

Finally, she came to the conclusion that "the soul capable of rejecting all the advantages which are offered

while the actress was sitting to him. "You are indeed fortunate," said he to the painter, "to have been inspired by such a model;" and, turning to the lady, added: "And you, Mademoiselle, have reason to congratulate yourself on being immortalised by such an artist." He then announced his intention of defraying the cost of the frame, which came to 5000 livres.

<sup>1</sup> Forty thousand francs a year, a house, a coach, and a table for six persons.



is a thousand times more noble than the one that accepts them," and declined to expatriate herself.<sup>1</sup> The Princess Galitzin was not the only distinguished foreigner to seek to perpetuate the genius of Mlle. Clairon. Garrick, who had seen her act at Lille, during his first visit to France in 1742, and prophesied a great future for her,—though this, of course, was in comedy—came to Paris, with his wife, after the conclusion of peace in 1763, on their way to Italy. A warm friendship sprang up between the great English actor and the Queen of the French stage, and so delighted was Garrick with the *tragédienne's* talent that he commissioned Gravelot to engrave a design, representing Mlle. Clairon "in all the attributes of Tragedy," her arm resting on a pile of books, on which might be read the names of Corneille, Racine, Voltaire, and Crébillon.<sup>2</sup> By her side stood Melpomene crowning her with laurel. At the top of the frame, on a ribbon encircled by an olive branch, one read:—

"Prophétie Accomplie."

And on a tablet at the base, the following verses:—

"J'ai prédit que Clairon illustrerait la scène,

Et mon esprit n'a point été déçu :

Elle a couronné Melpomène,

Melpomène lui rend ce qu'elle en a reçu."

—GARRICK.

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Mademoiselle Clairon* (edit. 1799), 307 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> In reference to the arrangement of these names, Monnet wrote to Garrick: "The drawing you gave Mlle. Clairon is engraved; it is now on sale, and M. de Crébillon is annoyed because they have placed his father after Voltaire, that is to say, below him: it is the last of the volumes on which Mlle. Clairon is leaning. I have thrown the blame on M. Gravelot, telling him that you held too high an opinion of his father's talent to commit such an error."—"Private Correspondence of David Garrick," ii. 442.

The following year, the Comte de Valbelle and a M. de Villepinte, another warm admirer of the actress, caused a gold medal to be struck in the lady's honour. On the face of this medal was Gravelot's allegorical design; while the reverse bore this inscription:—

L'Amitié  
Et Melpomène  
Ont Fait Frapper  
Cette  
MÉDAILLE  
EN 1764.

The pleasure which the lady derived from this piece of adulation must have been considerably discounted by the publication of the following mordant epigram, from the pen of the dramatist Saint-Foix, of whose works she appears to have spoken slightly:—

“Pour la fameuse Frétillon  
Ils ont osé frapper un médaillon;  
Mais à quelque prix qu'on le donne,  
Fut-ce douze sous, fut-ce même pour un,  
Il ne sera jamais aussi commun  
Que le fut jadis sa personne.”<sup>1</sup>

The pride of Mlle. Clairon, in those days, knew no bounds. “Madame de Pompadour,” said she, one day, “owes her sovereignty to chance; I owe mine to the power of my genius!” She treated even the most distinguished of her colleagues with haughty disdain, and often with the grossest discourtesy; and poor

<sup>1</sup> Collé, *Journal et Mémoires*, iii. 6. Collé was himself intensely disgusted by the conduct of Mlle. Clairon's fanatical admirers, and declares that if medals were to be struck in honour of an actress, who, after all, was nothing but a parrot, then statues—nay, pyramids—ought to be raised to the authors whose works she interpreted.

Mlle. Dangeville, the object of her childish adoration and the most sweet-tempered and inoffensive of women, retired from the stage ten years earlier than she would otherwise have done, vowing that it was "impossible to live any longer with such a creature." As for the younger actresses, they positively trembled before her; while, with the exception of Voltaire, whose admiration for her she condescended to reciprocate, there is said to have been not a single dramatic author of the time whom she had not insulted. The public she appears to have regarded very much as a queen might her subjects. On the occasion of a free performance at the Comédie, given by order of the King, she came on to the stage between the two pieces and threw handfuls of silver into the pit; and the worthy Parisians, quite gulled by this piece of theatrical quackery, cried, as they scrambled for the money, "*Vive le Roi et Mlle. Clairon!*"

Nevertheless, in spite of her arrogance and absurd pretensions, Mlle. Clairon had the interests of her profession sincerely at heart. She was, according to her own expression, the *chargé-d'affaires*, the advocate, and the postillion of the Comédie-Française, and it was always to her that her comrades turned when in any difficulty or perplexity. It was through her influence, joined to that of the Comte de Lauraguais, that the absurd custom of allowing the more distinguished members of the audience seats upon the stage itself—a custom which seriously hampered the movements of the players and was utterly destructive of all scenic illusion—was finally abolished. A word from her was sufficient to secure the payment of the overdue royal pension to the Comédie, which the *semainiers* had vainly solicited from the Comptroller-General; and

she laboured zealously, if unsuccessfully, to free her profession from the ban of the Church, which had weighed so long and so heavily upon it.

In the spring of 1761, there was published, at Amsterdam, a little volume, entitled *Liberté de la France contre le pouvoir arbitraire de l'excommunication, ouvrage dont est spécialement redevable aux sentiments généreux et supérieurs de Mlle. Clai . . .* This book, which was the work of one Huerne de la Mothe, an advocate of the Parliament of Paris, had been inspired by Mlle. Clairon, and was preceded by a letter from the actress to the author, in which she announced to the public that she hesitated to exercise her profession any longer, owing to her fear of the excommunication to which it subjected her. The bigots, ecclesiastical and lay, who were very roughly handled in the book, were exasperated to the last degree; the Grand'Chambre issued a decree ordering the obnoxious work to be burned by the public executioner in the Place de Grève, and poor Huerne de la Mothe was struck off the roll of advocates. Mlle. Clairon, however, who felt herself to be the cause of his misfortune, did not allow him to suffer by his championship of her profession, and persuaded the Duc de Choiseul to nominate him to a lucrative post in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Mlle. Clairon had many enemies: enemies in her own profession, enemies in the fashionable world, and enemies in the Republic of Letters. Two of the most formidable among the last-named were La Harpe and Fréron, the critic, the sworn foe of the philosophers. La Harpe hated her, it is said, because she had con-

temptuously refused to act in his plays; Fréron, because of her friendship with the elders of the Holy Philosophical Church, and, more especially, with its Patriarch, Voltaire, under whose blistering ridicule he had long writhed. La Harpe contented himself by making epigrams about her in society; but Fréron went further, and dared to attack her in print.

There had recently appeared at the Comédie a young, charming, accomplished, and, *mirabile dictu*, virtuous actress, named Mlle. d'Oigny, best remembered in theatrical history as the original representative of Rosine in Beaumarchais's *Barbier de Seville*.<sup>1</sup> Fréron, who prided himself on being one of the first to discover the talent of this lady, could not resist the temptation of contrasting her blameless life with that of Mlle. Clairon, and proceeded to do so in a remarkably effective manner.

In his *Année littéraire*, under date January 17, 1765, appeared an *éloge* in verse of Mlle. d'Oigny, "who had never consented to listen to any proposition of fortune, at the expense of her innocence," followed by a paragraph written by Fréron himself, which, although she was not actually mentioned by name, no one could have the least doubt referred to Mlle. Clairon:—

"One will be grateful to the author for having laid stress, in his just *éloge* of Mlle. d'Oigny, on her irreproachable conduct up to the present. May we always

<sup>1</sup> She refused first, the protection, and, afterwards, the hand of the Marquis de Gouffier, the latter on the ground that "while esteeming herself too much to be his mistress, she esteemed herself too little to be his wife." On her retirement from the stage in 1783, Louis XVI. granted her a special pension, "as if to show that virtue under his reign was as profitable as vice had been under his predecessor."—Hawkins, "The French Stage in the Eighteenth Century," ii. 107 and 299.

bear in mind that the Muses are chaste, and that they ought never to sing of libertinism and prostitution! Talents of the rarest order, or regarded as such, do not efface the opprobrium of a dissolute life. One may accord a certain measure of esteem to the performance of the actress, but the seal of contempt is always stamped upon her person. It is in vain that, after having acquired a disgraceful celebrity through vice, she affects a grave and reserved manner. This tardy and false decorum only serves to form a revolting contrast with a youth of infamy, and I do not know whether one does not prefer that a creature of this species should constantly show herself what she has been, rather than appear what she is not. The frankness of libertinism is, in point of fact, less shocking than the mournful simulation of dignity.”<sup>1</sup>

Terrible was the wrath of the insulted actress. To the Gentlemen of the Chamber she flew, and announced her intention of quitting the stage forthwith, and for ever, unless condign punishment was immediately inflicted on this vile scribbler who had dared to traduce her.

To pacify her, an order was issued for the arrest of Fréron and his incarceration in For l'Évêque. But when the police proceeded to his house to execute it, they found the critic in the agonies of gout: agonies so acute that it was impossible, he declared, to move a step without enduring torments; and his friends contrived to obtain a suspension of his sentence until he should be in a fit state to leave his bed. As may be supposed, this was not for some days, and, in the meantime, the devout Queen, Marie Leczinska, whose

<sup>1</sup> *L'Année littéraire par M. Fréron, Lettre V. Janvier 17*, cited by Edmond de Goncourt.

father had stood sponsor to one of Fréron's children, and who regarded that worthy as the champion of the Faith against the attacks of the philosophers, intervened on his behalf and obtained a further respite.

Mlle. Clairon refused to abide by the Queen's decision, reiterated her determination to retire from the stage if Fréron were not punished, and demanded an audience of the Prime Minister, the Duc de Choiseul.

"Justice!" cried she, in tragic accents, the moment she was ushered into his presence. "Justice, Monsieur le Duc!"

"Mademoiselle," replied the Minister, with mock gravity, "you and I both perform on a stage, but there is this difference between us: you choose the parts which you prefer, and are sure of the applause of the public. There are only a few persons of bad taste, such as this wretched Fréron, who refuse you their suffrages. I, on the contrary, have often a very disagreeable task; I strive to do my best, and am criticised, condemned, hissed, and ridiculed; yet, I remain at my post. Let us both of us sacrifice our private resentments to the good of our country, and serve it, each in our own way, to the best of our ability. And, besides, the Queen having pardoned, you can, without compromising your dignity, imitate her Majesty's clemency."

Mlle. Clairon, far from mollified by this badinage, returned home, and called a meeting of her friends and the members of the Comédie, presided over by the Duc de Duras, at which it was determined that the Comte de Saint-Florentin, *Commandeur des Ordres* to the King, should be threatened with the desertion of the entire troupe, unless speedy justice were done to the

modern Melpomene. "This line of conduct," writes Bachaumont, "has greatly disturbed M. de Saint-Florentin. This Minister has written to the Queen, stating that the affair has become one of the vastest importance; that for a very long time no matter of such serious import has been discussed at Court; that, in fact, the Court is divided into two factions on the question; and that, despite his profound respect for the commands of her Majesty, he much fears that he will be compelled to obey the original orders of the King."

However, eventually, the matter was allowed to rest, and, by the irony of Fate, barely two months had passed before Mlle. Clairon herself was sent to For l'Évêque. And this was how it came about.

After the Easter recess of that year, the Comédie-Française was announced to open with De Belloy's phenomenally successful tragedy, *Le Siège de Calais*, then at the height of its popularity. All the boxes had been engaged for several performances, and there was every indication of a most successful season. An unexpected incident ruined everything. "An actor named Dubois, who," says Grimm, "had for the last twenty-nine years enjoyed the confidence of all the tragic heroes," had a dispute over a bill with a surgeon named Benoît, whose professional services he had had occasion to seek, under somewhat discreditable circumstances. Dubois declared that he had paid the bill; Benoît was equally positive that he had not, and commenced proceedings to recover the amount owing. The actor's colleagues, annoyed to find one of their number mixed up in such an affair, brought the matter to the notice of the Gentlemen of the Chamber, who gave them permission to decide upon it themselves. They, accordingly, held



an inquiry, found that Dubois had lied—indeed, he confessed as much—and, at the instigation of Mlle. Clairon, and with the approval of the Gentlemen of the Chamber, expelled him and another actor named Blainville, who had given evidence in his comrade's favour, from the troupe.

Now, it happened that Dubois had a very pretty daughter, "who possessed the power," says Mlle. Clairon, "of rendering the Gentlemen of the Chamber as happy as they could desire to be." Like a dutiful child, she warmly espoused the cause of the cashiered actor, and, rushing, with dishevelled hair, into the presence of the Duc de Fronsac—son of the Maréchal de Richelieu—who in days gone by had been in the habit of paying her matutinal visits, disguised as a coffee-house waiter, besought his intervention on behalf of her unhappy father, the innocent victim, she declared, of the machinations of Mlle. Clairon.

The young duke, who still retained for the lady some remains of affection, promised to do what he could, with the result that on April 15, about three hours before the play was announced to begin, an order arrived from Versailles, to the effect that Dubois was to be allowed to take his usual part, until the King should decide on his fitness to remain a royal player.

A meeting of the company was hurriedly summoned, and a deputation sent to one of the Gentlemen of the Chamber who happened to be in Paris, to endeavour to obtain a rescission of the order, for that evening at least. But the deputation returned and reported the failure of its mission; the "Gentleman" had professed himself unable to do anything without consulting his colleagues. Thereupon, five members of the troupe,

Mlle. Clairon, Lekain, Brizard, Molé, and d'Auberval, declared their intention of refusing to play. Cost them what it might, they were absolutely determined never to appear upon the stage with Dubois again. Such was the position of affairs, when, at half-past five, the Comédie opened its doors. Let us listen to Collé's account of the scene which followed:—

“The audience assembled to witness *Le Siège de Calais*; it had been impossible to change the bills announcing the performance. When half-past five came, Lekain, Molé, and Brizard had not arrived. Mlle. Clairon had shown herself, but, perceiving and knowing that these gentlemen had no intention of appearing, did not take the trouble to dress, and went home in the sedan-chair which had brought her to the theatre. The remainder of the players, who were very reluctant to acquaint the public with this unwelcome news, were at a loss what to do. Ultimately, towards six o'clock, one of them left his comrades, went on to the stage, and began, in trembling accents, to address the audience with: ‘Messieurs, we are in despair—’ He was interrupted by some one in the pit, who shouted, ‘We want no despair! *Calais!*’ And, in an instant, the entire public took up the cry and shouted: ‘*Calais! Calais!*’

“After this first tumult had somewhat subsided, the actor wished to commence his speech, but the audience declined to hear any more. Some minutes passed thus, and then the actor briefly explained the impossibility of performing the tragedy in question, and proposed to play *Le Joueur* in its place, or to return the public their money; only to be received with renewed cries, more violent than before, of ‘*Calais! Calais!*’

"A moment later, Préville, the idol of the public, came on to the stage and endeavoured to begin the first scene of *Le Joueur*, but was interrupted, hooted, and hissed by the audience, who cried in a kind of frenzy: '*Calais!*' Several persons in the pit, who were aware that it was through the intrigues and machinations of Mlle. Clairon that the players had so signally failed the public, shouted: '*Calais, et Clairon en prison! Frétillon à l'hôpital!*'<sup>1</sup> *Frétillon aux cabanons!*'

"No doubt the majority of those who uttered these blasphemies were partisans of the Dubois, who had been posted by her and her father in the pit. This pandemonium, which might have become a scene of bloodshed, if the Guards on duty had chosen to interfere, lasted until seven o'clock, when the audience had their money returned to them."<sup>2</sup>

The following morning, there was a consultation between Sartines, the Lieutenant of Police, and the Gentlemen of the Chamber, when it was decided to make an example of Mlle. Clairon and the other recalcitrant players. The actress, who happened to be unwell, was in bed, and her friend Madame de Sauvigny, wife of the Intendant of Paris, was nursing her, when an inspector of police arrived and intimated that he had an order from the King to conduct Mlle. Clairon to For l'Évêque. Madame de Sauvigny protested against the arrest of her "best friend," but the *exempt* was inexorable, and Mlle. Clairon informed him that she would submit to the orders of the King. "All that I have," cried she, in her best stage manner, "is at his

<sup>1</sup> To which institution women of loose character who had misbehaved themselves were sent.

<sup>2</sup> Collé, *Mémoires et Journal*, iii. 27 et seq.

Majesty's disposal—my property, my person, and my life are in his hands. But my honour is untouched, and of that not even the King can deprive me."

The man of law bethought him of an old legal maxim. "Very true, Mademoiselle," he replied, "for where there is nothing, the King loses his rights."

Madame de Sauvigny insisted that Mlle. Clairon should proceed to For l'Evêque in her own carriage and announced her intention of accompanying her. But, as the carriage in question happened to be a *vis-à-vis*, and the *exempt* refused to lose sight of his prisoner, the noble lady was constrained to seat her friend upon her knees, and in this singular fashion they traversed the streets of Paris.<sup>1</sup>

At For l'Évêque, the famous actress was treated more like a distinguished guest than a prisoner. The most comfortable room available was allotted her, and furnished in luxurious fashion by her sympathising friends, the Duchesses de Duras and de Villeroi and Madame de Sauvigny; the courtyard of the fortress was crowded every day by the carriages of those who came to offer her their sympathy, and she was permitted to give delightful little supper parties. In less than a week, a complaisant physician having certified that further detention would be prejudicial to the lady's health, she was permitted to return home, under certain conditions, which she alludes to in a letter to Garrick, in answer to one of sympathy from the English actor:—

"PARIS, May 9, 1765.

"My soul, penetrated by a treatment as barbarous as it is unjust, had need, my dear friend, of the pleasure

<sup>1</sup> Collé, *Mémoires et Journal*, iii. 31.

that your letter has brought to it. This letter has interrupted for some moments the indignation and grief which consume me. Never has my health occasioned me so much anxiety, never have the mischances to which I am subjected been so multiplied, so violent. But be tranquil ; my courage is superior to all my misfortunes.

“Will you credit it? my comrades are still in prison! I myself was released the fifth day, but have been placed under arrest at my house, and prohibited from receiving more than six specified persons. It is said that Dubois has tendered his resignation; it is to be hoped that it will be accepted, and that we shall be at liberty this evening or to-morrow; it is time we were! As they have refused to permit any of my comrades to come and see me, I am in ignorance of what they think and what they intend to do.

“I am resolved not to give them any advice, but to occupy myself only with my own position, and, above all, with the esteem of honest people; I dare to be confident that I shall obtain that. I shall not share with you my reflections on the past, the present, and the future; not that I fear to submit them to your intelligence and your friendship, but because my letter might be opened, and they might misinterpret me; and I do not wish to afford them any pretext for persecution. Embrace Madame Garrick for me, and rest assured both of you that I love, esteem, and regret you as much as possible, and as you have the right to expect from the most sensitive and grateful of hearts.

“CLAIRON.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Private Correspondence of David Garrick,” ii. 432. Soon after this, Garrick very generously offered Mlle. Clairon a loan of 500 guineas, which, however, was not accepted.

After about three weeks of seclusion, Mlle. Clairon was permitted to resume her ordinary life, and as Dubois, the cause of all the trouble, had now resigned, it was anticipated that she would appear again upon the stage. On the plea of ill-health, however, she declined to return to the theatre, and, about the middle of June, it was common knowledge that the actress had requested permission to retire from the stage. The Maréchal de Richelieu, First Gentleman of the Chamber, refused her request, asserting that he would never consent to sign her *ordre de retraite* during his year of office, but offered to grant her leave of absence till the following Easter—that is to say, until the end of the theatrical year, in order that she might have time to go to Geneva and consult the celebrated doctor, Tronchin.

To Geneva she accordingly went, and obtained the advice she came to seek; Tronchin, who, great man though he was, was not above humouring the whims of his distinguished patients, assuring her that he would not answer for the consequences if she returned to the stage.

From Geneva she proceeded to Ferney, in response to a pressing invitation from its master, who assured her that it was “a temple where incense was burning for her,” and that “to see and hear her would be his Fountain of Youth.”

When she reached Ferney, Voltaire was ill, but no sooner had she declaimed her part in his *Orphelin de la Chine*, than he professed himself completely cured. During her stay, she performed several times in the little theatre of the château, playing Aménarde in *Tancrède* and Électre in *Oreste*, and the delighted poet wrote to d'Argental that in the latter character “she had shaken the Alps and Mont Jura”; while, in a letter to Monnet,

he declared that she had "made him feel twenty years younger."<sup>1</sup>

On leaving Ferney Mlle. Clairon went to Provence, to visit the Comte de Valbelle. While there, she attended the theatre at Marseilles, and, on being recognised, was loudly cheered by the occupants of the pit, who cried: "*Le Siège de Calais et Mlle. Clairon!*" and refused to desist until the governor of the province, the Duc de Villars, had promised to do all he could to persuade the actress to gratify them.

At the beginning of November, she was again in Paris, where great pressure was brought to bear upon her to induce her to reconsider her determination to retire from the stage. On one condition only would she consent to forget the horrors of For l'Évêque, namely, that the Comédie-Française should be erected into a Royal Academy of the Drama, which would have the effect of giving a legal status to its members, and would pave the way for the removal of the ecclesiastical ban. A petition was accordingly drawn up, which had the support of the Duc de Duras, the Duc d'Aumont, and several other important personages, and submitted to the

<sup>1</sup> It seems to have been as a kind of return for the homage paid her at Ferney, that, towards the end of 1772, Mlle. Clairon organised, at her house in Paris, the apotheosis of Voltaire, "in which she displayed all the riches of her imagination." "The bust of Voltaire," says Bachaumont, "was placed pompously in the midst of the assembly, when M. Marmontel, the *coryphée* of the house, presented an ode, composed by himself, in honour of the new god of Pindar. Mlle. Clairon, habited as a priestess of Apollo, placed a crown of laurel on the bust, and recited the ode with the most vehement enthusiasm. The assembly applauded loudly." This piece of adulation, grotesque though it was, seems to have been far from displeasing to the Patriarch, who returned thanks in a letter in verse, wherein he assured the lady that "his glory was entirely her work."—Gueullette, *Acteurs et Actrices du Temps passé*, p. 316.

King. But, owing apparently to the maladroit way in which the Duc de Duras, who had charge of the memoir, presented his case, it was refused; and, at the following Easter, Mlle. Clairon demanded her *congé*, which was accorded her. Here is the *ordre de retraite*:—

“We, Maréchal Duc de Richelieu, *pair de France*, First Gentleman of the King’s Chamber;

“We, Duc de Duras, *pair de France*, First Gentleman of the King’s Chamber;

“Mlle. Clairon, after having served the King and the public for twenty-two years with the greatest assiduity and the greatest attention, finding herself compelled, on account of her health, to quit the theatre, we have accorded her leave to retire, with the pension in conformity with the regulations.

“(Signed)

“THE MARÉCHAL DUC DE RICHELIEU.

“THE DUC DE DURAS.<sup>1</sup>

“*Executed at Paris, April 23, 1766.*”

For some years after her retirement from the stage Mlle. Clairon resided in a house near the Pont-Royal, where Marmontel speaks of her receptions as “numerous and brilliant.” She frequently consented to recite some of her famous rôles at the houses of her aristocratic friends, and Horace Walpole writes, under date August 23, 1767: “Arrived in Paris at a quarter before seven;

<sup>1</sup> Mlle. Clairon had demanded a pension of 1500 livres, though thirty years’ service was required to entitle her to this. It is probable, however, that her request would have been granted, but for the opposition of Lekain, who had not forgiven her for her treatment of him in years gone by.



at eight to Madame du Deffand's; found the Clairon acting Agrippine and Phèdre; not tall, but I like her acting better than I expected. Supped with her and the Duchesses de Villeroi and d'Aiguillon."

Although she never again appeared on the boards of the Comédie-Française, the great *tragédienne* performed on several occasions in private theatres. On February 19, 1767, she played Zelmire in De Belloy's tragedy of that name, at the Hôtel d'Esclapon, Rue de Vaugirard, at a performance arranged for the benefit of Molé.<sup>1</sup> Again, in December 1768, she appeared as Dido and Roxane in *Bajazet*, at the little theatre belonging to the Duchesse de Villeroi, before the King of Denmark and the Prince of Saxe-Gotha. Grimm writes:—

"The Duchesse de Villeroi has reserved to herself the right of doing the honours to Mlle. Clairon in her little theatre. This celebrated actress played there twice, in the presence of the King of Denmark, the Hereditary Prince of Saxe-Gotha, and a little chosen company, for the theatre can only accommodate a hundred and ten persons. The first time, she played the part of Dido, and the second, that of Roxane, in the tragedy of *Bajazet*. After the play, she was presented by Madame de Villeroi to her august spectator, who drew a ring from his finger and placed it on the finger of the actress; but I know that, in spite of this royal courtesy, he had not the happiness to succeed with the illustrious Clairon. In her quality of Dido, she will not have found him tender enough; in her quality of Roxane, she will not have found him sufficiently humble; in her quality of Clairon,

<sup>1</sup> The takings, at a louis a head, amounted to 24,000 livres, which sum, if we are to believe Bachaumont, was spent by Molé, not in paying his debts, but in buying diamonds for his mistress.

she will not have found him sufficiently penetrated with admiration. In fact, notwithstanding the infatuation of the Court and the town for the young monarch, he has had the misfortune to displease the heroine of the *Théâtre-Français*.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, on the occasion of the fêtes at Versailles, in honour of the marriage of the Dauphin and Marie-Antoinette, in the spring of 1770, Mlle. Clairon appeared as *Athalie* and *Aménalde*. But five years of retirement had naturally not been without their effect upon her powers, and her acting seems to have caused general disappointment. Perhaps her unfortunate choice of a gown, “half-brown, half-yellow, which gave her the appearance of a shrivelled-up old woman,” had not a little to do with her comparative failure as Voltaire’s heroine.

An impression prevailed at this time that had Louis XV. only condescended to express a desire that Mlle. Clairon should return to the *Comédie-Française*, she would have consented to do so. But Louis XV. was not such an admirer of the lady’s acting as Voltaire—indeed, he seems to have preferred Mlle. Dumesnil—and when, three years before, Mlle. Clairon had caused him to be informed that she was prepared to play at Versailles as often as his Majesty might command her, had replied, to her intense chagrin, that he found the other actresses very capable.<sup>2</sup>

On her retirement from the theatre, Mlle. Clairon had opened a kind of dramatic academy. Here she trained a number of aspirants to histrionic fame, several of whom were destined to make their mark in years to

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance littéraire*, vi. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Madame Riccoboni to Garrick, January 29, 1767.

come. Among these may be mentioned the beautiful Mlle. Raucourt, herself, in her turn, the Queen of the Comédie-Française, and that excellent actor, Larive.

For Larive, the *ex-tragédienne* appears to have conceived an almost maternal affection, leaving no stone unturned to ensure his success upon the stage, and corresponding with him regularly for many years. Her early letters are chiefly of a professional kind: advice as to the way in which certain parts are to be played, as to the costumes suitable to those parts, and so forth. But occasionally we find her descending to more personal matters, rallying him on his *bonnes fortunes*, and moralising in the style of an indulgent elder brother.

“You have then made a conquest,” she writes, “and of a fine lady, you say? I am not astonished, since you are a very handsome man. But I cannot prevent myself from telling you that you are a great imbecile. If she is a woman who makes a profession of gallantry, or a marriageable girl, you ought certainly to refuse to have anything to do with her. A man should avoid the first, for fear of accidents, and never have to reproach himself with having corrupted the other. But if she be a married woman or a widow, that is current coin, the property of every one, and you will be doing wrong not to make use of it. No engagement, no prejudice, need restrain you. You are a man, young; you are bored. Guarantee yourself a serious attachment; that is an excellent thing; but why refuse to your senses, and to the necessity of diverting your mind, the tribute which both demand?”

In a letter, which, like the above, bears no date, but which was probably written in the summer of 1772, we

find a person mentioned who was to play a very important part in Mlle. Clairon's future life :—

“You have extended your hospitality to a dog; I have extended mine to a little boy. Molé sent me an unhappy widow with six children in want of bread. I have taken charge of one, and am busying myself in finding means to allow the rest to live. I shall not keep the child at my house; he is a little devil, and that annoys and wearies me. *But since he bears a close resemblance to the Margrave (of Anspach),* whom I am expecting to see arrive here this autumn, I have taken the child, in the hope of sending him to Germany. If that plan falls through, I shall put him to a trade, and pay his apprenticeship to whatever one his mother may choose.”

Christian Frederick Charles Alexander, Margrave of Anspach, Baireuth, and Brandenburg, Duke of Prussia, Count of Sayn, was the son of Frederick the Great's sister, Frederika Louise, and that potentate's favourite nephew. Born in 1736, and married, against his will, by his father, to a princess of Saxe-Coburg, “who resembled a faded lily which had begun to grow yellow,” he spent the greater part of his time in travelling in Italy, Holland, and France, and “gratifying his tastes for the arts and feminine society.”

The Margrave was not handsome, in fact, his appearance was distinctly unprepossessing. He had “a retreating forehead, sunken eyes, a nose like a trumpet, an enormously long peaked chin, and a long ungainly neck.” On the other hand, he was well-educated, sensible, and good-natured; “the best prince in Germany,” said the

Austrian Chancellor, Kaunitz, who was certainly in a position to judge.

The Margrave fell in love with Mlle. Clairon, who, though nearly old enough to be his mother, was still pretty; and, on the occasion of one of his frequent visits to Paris, invited her to return with him to Anspach and be his Margravine of the left-hand. To the *ex-tragédienne*, who had so often played the queen upon the stage, the prospect of occupying a quasi-royal position at this little German court was not without its attractions; perhaps ere long, she thought, the faded-lily princess might wither away altogether, in which event the consort of the left-hand might become the consort of the right. Moreover, her vanity was naturally flattered by the homage of a man twelve years her junior, and that man a Serene Highness! And, finally, it happened that she had just quarrelled violently with the Comte de Valbelle, who, not content with an occasional infidelity, as had been the case in the early days of their connection, had become a sort of professional Don Juan, who "brought daily pretty girls into his park," outraged husbands, supplanted lovers, and, in short, misconducted himself in so shocking a manner that, according to his disgusted mistress, "every one detested him from the bottom of their hearts."

And so it came about that, one fine day in the spring of 1773, Mlle. Clairon bade farewell to all her friends in Paris, and set out for Anspach, whence she wrote to the faithless Valbelle that it was her intention "to consecrate the remainder of her days" to the Margrave.

At Anspach, Mlle. Clairon remained for seventeen years. Our chief source of information in regard to

this period of her career are her own letters to her old pupil, Larive, with whom she continued to correspond regularly. In the earliest of these, she can hardly find words to describe the joys of her new life.

"I am very well," she writes, shortly after her installation, "and taking into consideration the care, the homage, the comforts, the kindnesses, and the marks of attachment that are lavished upon me, it would be impossible for my heart and my vanity not to be satisfied. My house does not grow less full; the greatest ladies do me the honour of supping with me. You cannot form any idea of the position I occupy in this country. I believe that I am in a dream. Sometimes I am tempted to imagine myself a personage . . ."

And again, under date October 15, 1773:—

"Would to Heaven, my dear child, that I had you near me! I should then be able to say that never had I been so happy. Every comfort, no kind of vexation, consideration, a commodious and beautiful house, a well-ordered, pleasant, and honourable life independent of the caprices which formerly troubled me, the impossibility of meeting ungrateful people, of seeing or hearing anything which recalls them, the opportunity of doing good—all this renders my life infinitely sweet. Add to all these blessings the certainty of making the happiness of the sweetest and kindest being I have ever known. After you had seen him, you would love him: that is nothing; one cannot form any idea of this good prince, unless you live with him. I see him every day, and am equally astonished at his frankness and the noble simplicity that

characterises all his actions. It is for such sovereigns that it is just and right to sacrifice one's life, and I feel no regret at having sacrificed mine to him."

But this enthusiasm does not last long, and, before twelve months have passed, we find Mademoiselle complaining of everything at Anspach, from the air to the cooking. In one letter she tells her correspondent that "the air of the country and *ennui* are killing her"; in another, that she has had to send for a French cook, because the Anspach cooking "displeased as much as it disagreed with her";<sup>1</sup> in a third, that she has had to abandon an attempt to establish a theatre at the Court, "because there are scarcely a dozen persons there who can carry on a conversation in French, while the rest do not understand a word of the language"; and, in a fourth, that "the women of this country are destitute of every grace to which your eyes are accustomed."

The fact of the matter was that the Court of Anspach did not approve of the advent of Mlle. Clairon; it feared that her installation would, sooner or later, be followed by an invasion of her compatriots, who would seize upon all the most lucrative posts in the State, and generally upset the established order of things. Neither had the Ministers been educated to serve under a *maîtresse en titre*, as had those of

<sup>1</sup> "During this time, Mlle. Clairon was living at the Margrave's expense, with four French servants in livery, Madame Senay, her *femme-de-chambre*, and a lackey, besides a French cook. The Margrave supplied her with the best wines from his cellar. Her expenses were enormous, and all paid from the Chamber of Finances of Anspach. These facts I had from the Maréchaux of the Court."—"Memoirs of Elizabeth Berkeley, Margravine of Anspach," i. 210.

France; they resented the interference of a woman—especially a foreigner—in the counsels of their master, and one of them, if Mlle. Clairon is to be believed, actually carried his resentment so far as to conspire against her life. Moreover, although the poor Margravine herself was compelled, through fear of her husband's anger, to treat her rival with courtesy, and even to invite her to her table, the other ladies of the Margrave's family, like the Duchesse of Würtemberg and the Margravine of Baireuth, absolutely refused to recognise the *ex-tragédienne*, and the feminine portion of the Court seems to have taken its cue from them, rather than from its nominal head.

However, in spite of difficulties and mortifications, Mlle. Clairon remained at her post, and, according to her own account, used the influence she had acquired over the Margrave in a highly beneficent manner; destroying abuses, reforming the finances, encouraging agriculture, and so forth. She also beautified the city of Anspach by an ornamental fountain, established a hospital, distributed considerable sums in charity, and was very popular among the poorer classes.

In the course of the year 1789, Mlle. Clairon found herself called up to face a rival influence. The eccentric and "*infinitamente indiscreet*,"<sup>1</sup> but charming and accomplished Elizabeth, Countess of Craven, descended upon Anspach. The countess had separated from her husband in 1780, since which she had spent the greater part of her time in wandering about the Continent. In the course of her travels, she had met the Margrave, whom she had known when she was a child, and who invited her to Anspach. She came,

<sup>1</sup> Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, March 7, 1785.





ELIZABETH BERKELEY, COUNTESS OF CRAVEN,  
AFTERWARDS MARGRAVINE OF  
ANSPACH

After the drawing by Sir JOSHUA REYNOLDS



and her stay was a long one. She infused new life into that dull German Court; she organised a theatre in a disused coach-house, and wrote little plays for it; she had a garden laid out in the English style, under her direction, at the Margrave's palace of Triesdorf, near Anspach; she founded a little academy for the encouragement of literature and the arts, and found means to amuse even the unamusable Margravine. Finally, she stole away the heart of the Margrave from his grey-haired Egeria, and wrote to her husband, with whom she still corresponded, that she was to be "treated as a sister."

At length, Lady Craven left for Paris. Soon afterwards, the Margrave announced his intention of visiting the French capital; Mlle. Clairon decided to accompany him. In Paris, the Margrave favoured her with so little of his company that she felt constrained to inquire the reason.

The prince returned an evasive answer; Mlle. Clairon caused a watch to be kept upon his movements, and discovered the fatal truth. So long as the Margrave remained in Paris, the deceived sultana, by a great effort of will, succeeded "in concealing beneath a countenance always calm, and sometimes laughing, the rending tortures of mind and body." But when the prince returned to Anspach, she declined to follow him, and sent instead a long and reproachful letter, wherein she informed him that "his frenzied passion for a woman of whose character, unfortunately, he alone was ignorant, his indifference to public opinion, the license of his new morals, his want of respect for his age and his dignity, obliged her to see in him only one who had thrown aside all restraint and decency in compliance

with the dictates of a depraved heart, or as one whose disordered intellect, while it excited pity, evinced also the necessity of restraint; that the veil was now lifted, and she knew herself never to have been anything but the hapless victim of his egotism and his divers caprices; and that, therefore, with infinite pain, she laid at his feet all the boons she had received from him, and bade him adieu . . . adieu for ever."

And so ended the last romance of Mlle. Clairon, and the only souvenir of her seventeen years' residence at Anspach is a kind of fancy bread, which is called "*Clairons Weck*" unto this day.<sup>1</sup>

As for the faithless Margrave, he was too happy in the society of Lady Craven, who shortly afterwards took up her residence at Anspach, to care much what became of her predecessor in his affections; and so infatuated did he become with that lady that, on his wife's death in 1791, he married her. In the following year, the prince—in the face of an eloquent letter of remonstrance from Mlle. Clairon—sold his margravates of Anspach and Baireuth to the King of Prussia, and migrated, with his wife, to England, where he died in 1806. The Margravine survived her husband more than twenty years, and died, at Naples, in 1828.

In 1785, during one of the visits to Paris which she had paid in company with the Margrave, Mlle. Clairon had purchased a country-house at Issy, and it was here that she now took up her residence. She lived a very quiet life, receiving and visiting a few old friends, and occupying the rest of her time with collecting objects of natural history, which had always been one of her favourite occupations, and the writing of her *Mémoires*.

<sup>1</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 385.

Madame Vigée Lebrun, the painter, who met Mlle. Clairon soon after her return to France, at the house of her former pupil, Larive, has left us the following impression of the famous *tragédienne* in her old age :—

“I had pictured to myself that she was very tall; and, on the contrary, she was very short and very thin; she held her head very erect, which gave her an air of dignity. I never heard any one speak with so much emphasis, for she retained her tragic tone and airs of a princess; but she gave me the impression of being clever and well informed. I sat beside her at table, and enjoyed much of her conversation. Larive showed her the greatest respect and attention.”<sup>1</sup>

Early in the year 1792, Mlle. Clairon completed her *Mémoires*, which she entrusted to Henri Meister, the friend of Diderot and the Neckers, who was leaving Paris for Germany, on the condition, so she subsequently asserted, that they should not be given to the world until ten years after her death. One day, however, in 1798, she learned, to her astonishment, through an article in a Paris journal, that they had been published in Germany, whereupon she hurriedly brought out a French edition, bearing the title: *Mémoires d'Hippolyte Clairon et Réflexions sur la déclamation théâtrale*.

These *Mémoires*, written in an absurdly solemn and grandiloquent style, even for the time, and “interspersed,” says the admiring editor of the English edition, “with precepts of practical morality which would do honour to our greatest philosophers,” reveal to us a very different Clairon from the Clairon of the police-reports and of the memoirs and correspondence of her con-

<sup>1</sup> *Souvenirs de Madame Vigée Lebrun*, i. 83.

temporaries ; but, unfortunately, there can be very little doubt which portrait comes nearer the truth. Partly, no doubt, for this reason, they had only a moderate success ; and though several copies bear the words "*Seconde édition*," they were, as a matter of fact, not reprinted until 1822, when they appeared in the well-known *Collection des Mémoires sur l'art dramatique*. The most interesting part of the book, in our opinion, are the chapters which the actress devotes to reflections upon her art, some of which may still be read with profit by candidates for histrionic fame. But what aroused most attention at the time the work was published was the celebrated history of the lady's ghost—the spectre of a young Breton whom she had pitilessly left to die of love, and who had vowed on his death-bed to haunt her for the remainder of her life.

Never was there so persistent and vindictive an apparition—though the term apparition is perhaps a misnomer, as the shade of the departed never actually showed itself. It was perpetually visiting her at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected places—at her *petits soupers*, while she was riding in her coach to shop in the Rue Saint-Honoré, and so forth. Sometimes its presence was announced by "a long-continued and piteous cry," which so terrified an elderly admirer who happened to be present on one occasion, that he "had to be conducted to his carriage more dead than alive" ;<sup>1</sup> sometimes by a loud report like that of

<sup>1</sup> Its effect was less terrifying upon "an amorous and jealous *intendant*," who mistook the ghostly visitant's cry for that of a lover in the flesh, and had the bad taste to remark to Mlle. Clairon that "the signals of her rendezvous were somewhat too noisy." And this after the poor lady had just recovered from a swoon lasting nearly a quarter of an hour !

a musket; at others by "a noise like the clapping of hands"; and finally, by "a celestial voice singing the most tender and pathetic airs."<sup>1</sup> No solution of these singular phenomena was ever forthcoming, though the assistance of the police was invoked in order to probe the mystery. But the most probable explanation is a little plot on the part of some friends of the young Breton to read the lady a much-needed lesson.

On her retirement from the stage, Mlle. Clairon had been in possession of a comfortable fortune, producing an income of some 18,000 livres; and though this had been considerably reduced by the financial jugglery of the Abbé Terrai, the loss had been subsequently repaired by the sale of her jewellery, art treasures, and natural history collection, which had realised 90,000 livres. In her old age, however, she fell into great poverty, though to attribute her financial losses to the Revolution—which swept away so many fortunes—as have several writers, would appear to be without justification, as on Fructidor 26, Year III., at a time when money was exceedingly scarce, we find her writing to a M. Pérignon, advocate, requesting him to find her a secure investment for a sum of 24,000 livres; while so late as October 9, 1801, when she made her will, she would appear, to judge by the various bequests she makes, to have been still in easy circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, there can be no question that between that date and her death, fifteen months later, she was reduced to great distress, as witness the following appeal addressed to Chaptal, the Minister of the Interior,

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Mademoiselle Clairon* (edit. 1799), p. 1 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *Mademoiselle Clairon*, p. 466.

and in response to which she received an order on the Treasury for 2000 livres :—

“CITIZEN MINISTER,—For a month past I have been vainly seeking a protector to bring me to your notice ; but if it be true that you are of a generous disposition, it is to you alone that I should address myself. Seventy-nine years of age, almost in want of the necessaries of life, celebrated at one time by the possession of some talents, I wait at your door until you condescend to grant me a moment. CLAIRON.”<sup>1</sup>

In good truth, an object-lesson for the moralist to dilate upon ! Clairon, the haughty, the incomparable Clairon, the idol of town and theatre ; Clairon, to have met whom in society was the proudest boast of the braggart in *Candide* ; Clairon, for whose smiles a King (according to Grimm) had sighed in vain, and a Serene Highness—not in vain ; Clairon, whose classic features had been painted by Van Loo and sculptured by Lemoine ; Clairon, in whose honour gold medals had been struck, and whose praises “bards sublime” had chanted—forced to beg her bread at the door of a Minister !

At the time when the above letter was written, the old actress had removed from Issy, and was living in the Rue de Lille with a Madame de la Rianderie,<sup>2</sup> the widow of an officer in the Gardes-Françaises. Here she was visited by Lemontey, who describes her as a little,

<sup>1</sup> Gueullette, *Acteurs et Actrices du Temps passé*, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> Marie Pauline Ménard. Mlle. Clairon had adopted her when a little girl and provided her *dot*, which led to a widespread belief that she was her natural daughter. This, however, was not the case.



withered old woman, feeble and sickly, but still retaining something of her majestic manner, and who spoke to him in a voice which had lost but little of its power and sweetness. Observing a little boy who had accompanied the historian, she motioned him to approach, saying: "Make that child come here. He will be very pleased to be able to say one day that he has seen and spoken to Mlle. Clairon."

Another of her visitors was the English actor John Kemble, to whom she recited a scene from *Phèdre* with a majesty and fire truly astonishing in one so old and frail.

Mlle. Clairon died on January 31, 1803, six days after completing her eightieth year.

Animated to the last by the pride which had dominated her whole life, Mlle. Clairon bequeathed to the nation her marble bust by Lemoine and the gold medal which Valbelle and Villepinte had caused to be struck in her honour; but, for some reason, these souvenirs were not accepted. The native town of the great actress showed itself less indifferent than the State, and placed a commemorative tablet on the house in which she had been born. In 1876, however, the house collapsed beneath the weight of years, and the tablet was buried under its ruins.<sup>1</sup>

The remains of Mlle. Clairon were interred in the cemetery of Vaugirard, where they remained until its suppression in April 1837, when, escorted by a deputation from the Comédie-Française, they were transferred to Père-Lachaise, and there re-interred, Samson pro-

<sup>1</sup> Gueullette, *Acteurs et Actrices du Temps passé*, p. 321.

nouncing an *éloge* over the grave. In 1889, at the solicitation of M. Caille, an inhabitant of Condé, the *sociétaires* of the Comédie-Française decided that the tomb of the famous *tragédienne* should be completely restored, and voted for that purpose a sum of one thousand francs.

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